

bernice summerfield

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MISSING ADVENTURES



edited by
rebecca levene

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MISSING ADVENTURES

**A short-story collection
edited by Rebecca Levene**

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FINISH**

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The Tunnels to Heaven © Andy Bodle
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Biology Lesson on Mal Oreille

Xanna Eve Chown

Bernice Summerfield looked at herself in the mirror. It was almost time to start for the shuttle, but there was just a minute — to see how she looked in her new school uniform.

'It's awful,' thought Benny, turning herself about. 'Brown coat, brown hat, orange ribbon, and a brown tunic underneath with an orange belt. I hate it.'

Her father looked into Benny's room and smiled. 'Admiring yourself?' he asked, then caught sight of Benny's expression and laughed loudly. 'Oh, Benny, it's not that bad.' He ruffled her hair. 'Anyway, all the other girls will be dressed exactly the same way.'

Benny pulled a face at herself in the mirror. 'So we'll all look stupid.'

'Time to go,' said her father, picking up her suitcase with a sigh. Benny didn't move. 'I've booked the shuttle, they'll be expecting you.' Benny carried on staring at the mirror. 'Benny, this is my last day of leave. You can't stay here.' Benny shrugged and followed her father out of the room.

They reached the spaceport in plenty of time. The shuttle was easy to spot through the glass behind the check-in desk. Short and squat, it was a dull silver colour, with stripes of brown and orange running

around the side. A sign flashed next to it: *Mal Oreille Towers Boarding School (COPS)*.

'Cops?' asked Benny.

'Children Of Military Personnel School.'

'That's COMPS.'

'True,' said her father, smiling. He put an arm round his daughter and bent down so that his face was at the same level as hers. 'Benny,' he said seriously. 'I know it's been hard for you. For us. And I don't blame you for what happened at your last school. But -' He stopped. Benny was looking at him with a serious, intense expression. He decided to change tack. 'Hey, you're too young to be looking like that. All I'll say is this. See if you can go for longer than a week without getting called to the headteacher's office, eh?' He grinned, and Benny grinned back, for the first time that morning.

'Yeah, Dad,' she said. 'I'll see if I can make it two weeks.'

'That's my girl,' said Admiral Summerfield.

Benny joined the queue of girls waiting to board the shuttle. They were all wearing the same brown tunic and hat. She looked carefully from girl to girl, but couldn't see a single one that it suited. The uniform made the plump girls look fat and the thin ones look scrawny.

Two teachers were waiting at the security gate. One was tall with long hair tied in a complicated bun on the top of her head. The other had large glasses and was holding out an electronic clipboard. Benny put her palm against the sensor.

'Bernice Summerfield?' she asked. Benny nodded and took her palm away. The woman next to her held out a hand.

'I'm Dr Thynne, your headmistress.' Benny shyly shook hands.

'New girls, first year, red point A,' said the lady with the clipboard. She gestured past the security gate to where a long line of assembly points stretched out along the runway. '*Don't* walk beyond the yellow line.' She ushered Benny through and held out her clipboard to the next girl.

Benny saw her assembly point at once. A red post with a plastic A stuck at the top and a small huddle of girls underneath. They stared as Benny approached. No one was talking.

'Hi!' Benny said, with as sincere a smile as she could muster. 'I'm Benny.' She waited. Three pairs of eyes looked her up and down.

'Darrell,' said a dark girl with spectacles. She looked pointedly at the girl next to her.

'Alicia,' said the second girl, with a sigh.

'I'm Gwendolene,' said the third girl. 'Urn - the teacher told us not to talk.'

'Sorry,' said Benny. A whistle blew from near the shuttle.

'In a line please, girls,' called a teacher. 'Everybody! That's right. Holding hands.' Benny took hold of Darrell's hand and they fell in line behind Alicia and Gwendolene. She noticed that all the new girls were holding each other's hands at the fingertips as if they had some kind of plague-virus.

'Hey, did any of you know that the plague-virus on Beta 20 was caused by *pig spit*?' she began. It was a fact she had learned from a boy at her old school. It had impressed her with its grossness at the time. Maybe it would impress people here.

'I know that's not true,' said Darrell.

'It is too,' said Benny, automatically.

'S'not,' said Darrell. 'It's a space myth, my mum said. She's a doctor.'

'Oh.' Benny felt deflated.

'Anyway, how does the pig spit get into your -'

'Quiet, girls,' called a teacher from further along the line. 'I can't think above this noise.'

'Watch out for Matron,' hissed one of the girls behind Benny, poking her in the back. 'Most of the time she's a brick, but you don't want to get on the wrong side of her when she's in one of her tempers.' Benny looked curiously at the woman. Her clothes bulged around her, as if they were several sizes too small. Matron glared at her and Benny finally shut up and waited in silence to board the shuttle. The journey was uneventful. Some of the girls cried when the nurse came round to administer the injection, but Benny was used to space travel and knew the routine. She settled back in her seat, held out her arm for the needle and slept.

The school had its own shuttleport just outside the school grounds. When Benny awoke, slightly stiff, she was dismayed to find that they were expected to walk to the school.

'Come on, girls, it's not far,' said Matron, clapping her hands together. 'A short walk will help get your circulation going again after the long flight.' She glared at the girls' legs. 'In a line again, if you please. Don't leave the electric path.'

Benny paired up with Darrell again and they stumbled across the runway. The path to the school was marked out on either side with

flashing lights. A large sign told them in 12 languages that the lights had a small electric current running through them. It was not a good idea to attempt to leave the path.

'Hey, if you touched the lights you'd get a shock,' said Darrell, nudging Benny with her elbow. 'Get it?' Benny smiled at the joke. Maybe she could make friends with Darrell, she thought. She hadn't been at her last school long enough to make proper friends. All her previous schools had been on military bases where people moved around a lot. She knew her dad was hoping she would settle down and make friends.

It really wasn't far to the school. The straggling crocodile of girls reached it in a few minutes and found a group of older girls by the entrance waiting to help the new arrivals find their way. One pushed towards Benny and Darrell, her plaits bouncing on her shoulders.

'Hello there, girls!' she said. 'I'm Katherine, your dorm monitor. It's my job to show you the ropes. I say, I hope you didn't find the trip too much of a bore! Space travel can be beastly sometimes.' Benny and Darrell followed her through several long corridors to the dormitory. Benny was pleased to find she had a bed next to Darrell. She looked around the room at the other girls. They were sitting on their beds, chatting and unpacking their overnight bags. Their trunks would be brought up to the dorm tomorrow. None of them seemed particularly interested in talking to the new girls. It's always like this to start with, thought Benny. Being accepted takes time.

Benny woke the next morning to the seven o'clock alarm call. At half past seven, Katherine came round to escort the girls to breakfast. First, she made sure that each girl had made her bed properly. Then she called the new girls together and handed each of them a small electronic device.

'Everyone needs one of these,' she said. 'That's it. Jolly good. It's called a schoolsat. Did any of you have it at your old school?' Gwendolene timidly raised one hand. 'Smashing! Okay, you others. Clip it onto your belt like this. You can receive and send messages - *not* in class obviously - and get group alerts. There's a radio function too, of course, but you won't be able to use it. They don't let you have the code until you're in the fifth year, worse luck! Then there's a floor plan of the school and the grounds. That's terribly useful. It's a big school and it's frightfully easy to get lost. If you press *this* key,' she demonstrated on Benny's machine and a little red light flashed in one corner of the map, 'you'll know exactly where you are.'

'Yeah, and the *teachers* will know exactly where we are,' whispered Darrell. Katherine frowned and pretended she hadn't heard.

'See?' she continued. 'It's telling you you're in dorm three.' Benny nodded. 'The areas in grey are out of bounds. So don't go there unless you want a good wiggling! Press *here* to see your timetable. Super! The green light will flash five minutes before you are due in class.'

'No reason to ever be late then,' said Benny cheekily. But Katherine seemed to miss the sarcasm.

'I suppose not,' she said with a smile. 'But why would you want to be?'

As the girls trooped down to the canteen for breakfast, Benny felt slightly envious of the older girls. They seemed so confident and at ease, calling to each other across the hallway.

'Hi, Betty! I see you're up for the hockey team this term.'

'I know! I practised like anything over the hols.'

'Sally, you beast! You didn't write to me at all, I wrote to you heaps.'

'*Ooh, I wrote heaps,*' mimicked Darrell. Benny laughed. She was starting to like her new friend more and more.

'They do talk like that, don't they?' she said. 'Maybe it's a boarding school thing.' One of the older girls overheard her.

'I say! Never been to boarding school before?' she called out. 'You'll soon find your feet. As long as you're decent people, with good brains, you'll get a lot out of Mal Oreille Towers.'

Benny frowned. 'What if you're not?'

'Oh, that's okay,' said the older girl. 'It's queer, but the longer you stay here the decenter you get.' Benny shrugged and turned back to Darrell. Her friend wasn't listening. She was messing around with the buttons on her schoolbag.

'What's first lesson after breakfast?' Benny asked.

'Double games,' said Darrell. 'Then biology after break. *Boring.*'

Benny had never played lacrosse before. In fact, she had never even heard of lacrosse before. The teacher, Ms Murphy, was a heavy woman with calves like a rhinoceros's. She made the girls run three laps of the tennis court to warm up, then herded them down one end and handed out sticks with plastic nets on the end.

'Right girls,' bellowed Ms Murphy. 'In pairs, running across the court. *Throwing* the ball to each other and catching it in the net. *Throwing* the ball... That's it. Next!'

Benny was just behind Gwendolene, and watched her lunge for the

ball, miss her footing and crash down on one ankle. The other girls stopped what they were doing and ran over to help.

'Ms Murphy, she's gone a funny colour.'

'Get a doctor!'

Gwendolene was rubbing her ankle, trying not to cry. Ms Murphy pushed her way through the girls. 'It's not broken,' she sighed. 'Can you stand up?' Gwendolene shook her head. 'Someone run and get Matron then. I'll stay with Gwendolene until she comes. The rest of you up the other end of the court in pairs. Quickly now. *Throw* the ball and catch it in the net...'

Everyone thought Gwendolene would be in the sanatorium for the rest of the day, so Benny was surprised to find her better in time for biology. She was waiting for the rest of the class in the corridor outside the lab.

'You're okay!' exclaimed Benny in surprise. 'I thought you'd hurt yourself.'

'Don't worry about me, old girl,' said Gwendolene, slapping Benny affectionately on the arm. 'I'm tougher than I look.'

'Er, yeah. Glad you're better,' mumbled Benny. Gwendolene had made a miraculous recovery from her shyness too, she thought. She moved away and watched Gwendolene chatting to the other girls.

'So, I thought I could try out for the lacrosse team anyway,' she was saying. 'Oh, I do so hope they let me. I'm such a chump to fall like that!' She's so *chummy* with the other girls all of a sudden, Benny thought. She checked herself. This school was getting to her. Chummy was not a word that would have been in her vocabulary yesterday.

'That's weird,' whispered Darrell in Benny's ear.

'What is?' asked Benny.

'Well, my mother - who's a doctor - she told me it takes a few days for a bad sprain to heal properly. And look. Gwendolene's ankle is fine.'

'You don't think -' said Benny.

'I do,' said Darrell. 'I think she was faking it.'

'Oh. Yeah, I guess that's it.'

Gwendolene was chattering on excitedly. 'I say! I don't rate the medicine in your san much. I mean, some of it tastes simply ghastly!' She burst out laughing and the other girls joined in. Benny and Darrell moved away.

'Some people have no trouble fitting in,' said Darrell gloomily.

'I don't know,' said Benny. 'I think I preferred her when she was quieter.'

The door to the biology lab opened and the class piled in. The room was full of long benches arranged in rows with high stools behind them and one large circular table in a corner. The teacher's desk was at the front and Dr Thynne, the headmistress, was standing behind it.

'Newbies don't choose seats till last,' hissed a girl as she pushed past Benny and Darrell.

'What?' said Benny angrily, but Darrell took hold of her arm and held her back to let the other girls past.

'No point in making enemies on your first day,' she said. Benny looked wistfully at the benches at the very back of the room, which were filling up fast.

'Bags I this one,' called the girls as they claimed their seats.

'I say, right by the window. What luck!'

'Oh, you beast, Jilly! You said I could sit with you this term!'

Dr Thynne looked on indulgently from her desk at the front of the room. Benny and Darrell made their way to the bench nearest her desk and sat down. Right under the teacher's nose, Benny thought.

'Good morning, girls,' said the headmistress. Stools scraped as the class stood up. Benny scrambled to her feet and chanted with the others.

'Good morning, Dr Thynne.' The girls sat down again and the headmistress smiled around the room. She was wearing a long white labcoat over her usual clothes.

'And a special good morning to all the new girls in this group,' she said, looking directly at Benny. 'Although I am, of course, your headteacher, I do have a hands-on approach to teaching.' She smiled at Benny's blank face. 'What I mean is, I will be teaching you biology this term.' Dr Thynne switched on the large monitor on the wall behind her and an image of a sparkling, golden ocean appeared on the screen. 'This term, we will be looking at the flora and fauna of Mal Oreille. By studying the life that has evolved on this planet, you will have a chance to really understand your surroundings.' She paused for effect. 'And it will also give us a chance for some rather exciting field trips later on in the year.' All the girls murmured their approval politely. 'Now, who can tell me something about the surface of the planet we are on right now?'

Several hands shot into the air.

'Yes, Jennifer.'

`It's mostly sea, Dr Thynne.'

`That's right. Mal Oreille is almost completely covered in water. Can anyone remember the percentage?'

Slightly fewer hands were raised.

`97 per cent, Dr Thynne?'

`Well done, Jill. And what is *unusual* about the ocean that covers this terribly watery planet?'

`It's not blue!'

`Quite right. It is a lovely golden colour, thanks to an algae called... anyone...?'

This time there were no hands. Dr Thynne clicked her remote control at the monitor on the wall and the picture changed to display an enlarged photo of a fuzzy golden ball.

`Orili Malorus,' she said, sounding pleased. `So, what can you girls tell me about the plants and animals we will be looking at this term?' Benny thought for a moment, then put up a hand.

`They'll all be sea creatures?' she asked.

`Very good, Bernice,' said the headmistress, smiling at her. 'They will all be sea creatures. And today, we are starting with one of the simplest: the Mal Oreille ocean snail. So, if we can gather round the viewing table, please girls? We'll make a start.'

Benny followed the other girls to the circular table in the corner of the room. It was wide enough for the whole class to stand round the outside in a ring. Set into the middle of the table was a large, sunken tank filled with golden water. Dr Thynne leaned across and pulled out a piece of yellowy-brown seaweed with a pair of tongs. She laid it on an examination plate in front of her.

`Mal Oreille kelp,' she said. 'Interesting, in itself. Vital for maintaining the levels of oxygen in the ocean and - most importantly for this demonstration - the only food source of the ocean snail.' The headmistress picked up a pair of blue scissors with long blades. She cut a small section from the seaweed then tipped the rest of the seaweed back into the sunken tank.

The girls stared as she pulled back the lid of a plastic tub and used the tongs to pick out an orange snail. She placed it next to the seaweed cutting on the examination plate. The snail was about the same size as a small patch of dark speckles on the side of the seaweed. 'Watch carefully,' she instructed. 'The snail is very hungry.' Slowly, the snail pushed its head out from its shell and extended its tiny horns. It could sense the food. It started moving towards it,

inching itself across the plate until it was on top of the seaweed. Then it began to eat. Benny watched as the piece of seaweed got smaller and the plate got stickier. Mal Oreille snails obviously left nastier slime trails than the ones back home, she thought. Dr Thynne was gazing at the plate, enraptured. The other girls glanced at each other, waiting for something to happen. The snail finished eating the seaweed and started to move away across the plate, but all eyes were on the glistening slime trail behind it. It started to thicken, pucker slightly at the sides then turn yellow. Dr Thynne picked it up with the tongs.

'Can everyone see?' she asked. Around the desk, the girls nodded.

'Gosh!' said Jill. The teacher was holding out a perfect replica of the digested seaweed. Dr Thynne smiled. She loved this demonstration. It never failed to grab the attention of the girls.

'This snail has many predators,' said Dr Thynne. 'Predators that can tell where it has been by looking for patches of recently nibbled seaweed. By creating this replica, the snail stays safe - for a short while at least.' She put the seaweed back on the plate, picked up the snail with the tongs and plopped it back into the central tank. 'One of the things we will learn over the next few weeks,' she said, 'is that this ability is shared to some extent by every species on this planet.'

'They can all make seaweed?' asked Benny, innocently. She leaned across the desk to get a closer look at the plate.

'Not so specific,' said Dr Thynne. 'It's more of a general theme. All the creatures on Mal Oreille have the ability to cover their tracks, often in a most unusual way. I'm writing a paper on it,' she added. But Benny was staring at the seaweed.

'It's not exactly the same,' said Benny suddenly.

'No?' asked the headmistress.

'No,' said Benny. 'There was a patch of brown stuff on the real seaweed. It's not there on this one.'

'Ah, yes,' said Dr Thynne. 'The snail has excluded the seaweed blight from its copy. It hasn't just made an exact replica. It has made something *better* than the original.'

Darrell found Benny in the playground at lunchtime.

'What'cha doing?' asked Darrell.

'Nothing,' said Benny. She was sitting on a wall eating an apple.

'I know where the planet gets its name from,' said Darrell, climbing up on the wall next to her. 'Me and mum looked it up in her Planet Atlas before I came.'

'Cool,' said Benny.

'Yeah. When the planet was discovered there were loads of giant toads living here. The first settlers hated them because of the noise. They were just croaking all day and all night and it drove everyone crazy.'

'So, where does the name come from?'

'Mal Oreille means Earache.'

'Yeah? Where are the toads now?'

'People hunted them till they were almost extinct. There are a few probably living on some tiny islands, right out in the middle of the sea somewhere, but they're an endangered species.'

'I heard the name was something to do with the water,' said Benny.

'It says that in the school brochure,' Darrell said scornfully. 'I read that too. But it's not true, they're just trying to make the planet sound better. It says the original name was Mal Or which means Bad Gold. 'Cos when people saw the colour of the water, they thought it had gold in it. So they spent loads of money trying to get the gold out, but all they could find was the weird yellow algae.'

'That's stupid,' said Benny.

'Some of them *drowned* themselves in despair when they realised they had wasted all their money,' said Darrell, ghoulishly. 'Would you rather live on a planet called Bad Gold or Earache?'

Benny shrugged. 'Neither,' she said. But that night, she dreamed she was standing on a beach watching golden waves splashing against the shore. She could see the skeletons of drowned prospectors emerging from the water. They raised their bony hands and clicked their creaking joints together with a noise like a toad's croak, then sank back down under the waves.

When Benny woke up the next morning, the rest of her dorm was crowding around Alicia's bed. Alicia was refusing to get up.

'My stomach hurts,' she groaned.

'You were too much of a greedy guts at supper last night,' said one of the girls. She shook the edge of Alicia's pillow. 'Come on, get up. The whole dorm gets in trouble if one girl stays in bed.'

'I can't,' moaned Alicia. 'I'm going to be sick.' She stood up and ran dramatically to one of the basins in the corner of the room.

'Ewww!' squealed the other girls, as Alicia vomited noisily into the sink.

'Gosh, someone had better fetch Matron,' said someone. 'She's not making it up.'

'I don't want to miss technology,' moaned Alicia from the sink. 'It's the first class today. They're going to show us how to dismantle a satellite clock.' Darrell and Benny giggled all the way down to breakfast.

'I wish I could miss technology,' said Darrell.

'Me too,' said Benny. 'What do you think she ate?'

'I don't know. Maybe there was pig spit in it...'

At break, Darrell had an idea. 'We could go and see how Alicia's doing,' she said. 'It'd be cool to see what the san looks like inside. I bet it's not got as much stuff as Mum's medical room on the base.' Benny followed her down the corridor and pressed the button by the double doors. They opened with a pleasant swoosh and let the girls into the sanitising airlock.

'We've come to see Matron, please,' said Darrell into the communicator. The buttons on their schoolsats flashed.

'Darrell Rivers and Bernice Summerfield,' grated the mechanical voice. A light shower of disinfectant sprayed over them from the ceiling and Matron opened the door on the far side of the airlock.

'More first years,' she said. 'Have you got poorly tummies too?'

'We're okay,' said Darrell. 'We've come to see Alicia.'

'Alicia?' asked Matron. 'But she was feeling so much better I let her go back to class.' Darrell raised her eyebrows. Maybe Alicia had been faking it, after all. They left the san and found Alicia in the junior common room, chatting to another girl about the sports fixtures.

'Golly! Do you really think I could make school team?' she was saying. 'I played a bit at my old school. I could get up to scratch with some proper coaching and a bit of hard work.'

'Alicia?' said Benny. 'Are you okay?'

'Right as rain. Matron had me fixed in no time.'

'Well, at least you won't have to miss technology.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You're dismantling a satellite clock.'

'I am? I had no idea.'

'You were really excited about it before.'

'Before what? I say, are you pulling my leg?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'I'm afraid I don't have a clue what you're on about, old thing.'

Benny backed away and beckoned Darrell to follow her.

'Old thing?' she mouthed. 'Now she's talking funny too.'

'Funny like what?'

'Funny like the other girls do. Like - like Gwendolene when she came back from the san.'

'Hey, you're right,' said Darrell, slowly. 'Maybe they're drugging the food in the san to make us more like... I dunno... like that.'

'They wouldn't dare,' said Benny.

'My mum hears about things like this all the time,' said Darrell loftily.

'We can find out,' said Benny, excitedly. 'I'll pretend to be ill, and get sent to Matron. Then I can see if she tries to give me any weird medicine.'

'That's a crazy idea,' said Darrell. But she was excited too. 'What if she makes you take it?'

'She can't make me, can she? I'll just say I'm feeling better.'

'Hey, if you go now, you'll miss maths.'

'Even better,' said Benny. 'What shall I say is wrong with me?'

'Say you've got a really bad headache. Say there's lights flashing behind your eyes or something.'

'Okay,' said Benny.

'It's called a migraine,' said Darrell. 'My mum told me all about them. She's a doctor.'

'I know.'

Benny was good at pretending to be ill. Her mother had been hard to fool, so Benny had had to raise her game. The key, she had discovered, was to do all that you could to convince yourself that you felt ill in your mind, then your body kind of played along for a bit. They went to find their dorm monitor.

'Katherine,' she moaned. 'I've got a headache.'

'How bad?' asked Katherine.

'I can sort of see spots round my eyes,' said Benny. 'And I feel sick.'

Katherine sighed. 'You first years are really something,' she said. 'Shall I take you to see Matron or can you make it there on your own?'

'I'll take her,' said Darrell.

'All right,' said Katherine, typing an authorisation code into Benny's schoolsat. 'I'm sure you'll feel better if you lie down for a bit.'

'You were great,' said Darrell, as they walked away. 'Type me a message on your schoolsat now. Then if something weird happens all you have to do is press send and I'll come!'

'What do you want me to say?'

'Say...Bad Gold! It'll be like a secret code.'

Matron was sympathetic and Benny was soon installed in the san. There were six other beds in the room. but she was the only patient. Matron brought a jug of water. dimmed the lights and showed Darrell out of the room.

'She'll be fine; said Matron firmly. as Darrell lingered by the door. 'I'm sure you have a lesson to go to.'

'But -'

'She'll feel better without you.' said Matron. 'It hurts to talk. doesn't it Bernice?'

'Y-yes.' said Benny feebly.

'You see?'

'I'll keep my schoolsat in my pocket.' whispered Darrell.

'Goodbye,' said Matron, propelling her into the airlock. Darrell waved through the glass.

'Text me,' she mouthed. Matron shut the doors behind her and looked appraisingly at Benny.

'Get some sleep,' she said, 'and ring the bell if you need anything. For goodness' sake put your schoolsat away in the bedside table. Looking at a tiny screen won't help a headache.' Matron turned to go and Benny tucked the schoolsat into her pocket and settled back on the pillows. It was nice to be somewhere so peaceful. The hum of the machines on the wall was soothing. They were all set to the standard level of white noise prescribed for a hospital facility so Benny had no problems sleeping.

Two thoughts came into Benny's head as she woke up. One was that she was hungry. The other was that she wasn't alone.

'Bernice,' said a voice.

'Wm-huh?' Benny sat up quickly, clutching the covers up to her neck. Matron was leaning over the bed. 'What time is it?'

'It's two o'clock.'

'In the morning?'

Matron nodded. Rubbing her eyes, Benny sat up in bed. Matron gave a quick smile then crossed the room to look out of the window. Clip, clip, clip went her heels on the floor. Benny reached into her pocket. The schoolsat was still in message mode. Benny thought for a moment, then pressed *send*.

'You won't be needing that,' said Matron, coming back to the bed with her hand held out. 'I told you to put it away.' Benny handed her the schoolsat. Matron's calves bulged around the edge of her tight skirt as she bent down and shut the device in the cupboard. 'Good,'

said Matron. She slipped off her shoes and walked around the bed. It was more of a waddle than a walk, Benny thought. She felt slightly embarrassed for her.

`Just stay where you are, Bernice,' said Matron. Her voice had changed. It sounded as if it were coming from somewhere deep inside her stomach. Benny stayed where she was and clutched at the sheets tightly. Matron didn't look quite like she remembered either. Her legs were plumper, and shorter. Her feet, without shoes on, were a lot bigger than she had expected - wider and flatter and yellower. In fact, her whole body was taking on a rather unpleasant colour. It was the same sort of yellow as the seaweed in the biology lab. Benny opened her mouth to say something, but shut it again. For once, she had no idea what to say. Matron held out her pudgy arms and laughed. Then, her face started to change too. Nothing that Benny had ever seen before in her life had prepared her for this. Matron's eyes bulged in her head and her mouth split and stretched into a wide slit. It forced the skin of her face out to the sides, pulling at her nostrils until the nose was just two gaping, stretched-out holes. Crack! Something struck Benny hard across her cheek and ear. She fell back against the pillow, raising a hand to her face and saw Matron retracting a long tongue back into her mouth.

`My dad will -' Benny started, but her tongue felt too thick to form the words properly. She tried to put a hand to her mouth, but her arm was numb too. Her left eye was starting to throb, and she couldn't see out of it properly. The skin on her cheek was swelling up and forcing the eyelid shut.

`Stupid child,' spat the creature-that-used-to-be-Matron. Its saliva was dripping yellow from its elongated mouth. 'But what do you expect? Comes from the stupid race that thought the sea was made of gold.' She dragged herself over to the bed and crouched over Benny, placing long, slimy fingers on her stomach. Benny's throat was so swollen she couldn't even scream. I shouldn't have pretended I was ill, she thought, desperately. The creature threw back her head and opened its mouth, letting spit spill out from the corners. Benny winced as a drop fell on her arm, burning her skin. The creature heaved and spat out a huge ball of phlegm. A lump of yellow jelly filled with tiny black dots landed on the floor. It bubbled under the bed, looking like a giant piece of frogspawn. The creature dragged itself up on its warty legs.

`Look,' it hissed. The black spots in the jelly started fizzing and growing. The yellow mucus around them stretched and the whole

lump started bubbling up, larger and larger, until it towered over the bed. The left side of Benny's face was itching. She tried to move her tongue. Her lips felt like rubber.

'What is it?' she said thickly.

'Just water,' hissed the creature. 'Just sea water. All life is mostly water.'

'Are you going to eat me?' asked Benny. It sounded absurd as she said it, like something out of a story. 'Do you eat people?' Her voice was unrecognisable, strangled with fright and the numbness in her lips. The creature gurgled again.

'I don't want to eat you,' it said. 'All that bone's too hard. That mushy flesh, and all the slimy bits inside, too chewy. Nasty, solid food.'

'You don't eat people,' said Benny, in some relief.

'I don't eat them,' said the creature. 'I can't chew them, I have no teeth.' The yellow jelly beside the bed wobbled in time to its words.

'You have no teeth,' echoed Benny.

'I drink them.'

A thrill of panic ran through Benny's body.

'I'll drink your blood,' said the creature. It reached around the side of Benny's bed and pulled out a large plastic bowl, striped in the school colours of orange and brown. Inside was a syringe and a long tube. The creature placed the tube and syringe on the bed, sighed happily and licked the towering column of jelly.

With a strange, wet popping noise, the tower of jelly started collapsing in on itself. Yellow fluid was oozing down its sides, soaking the bed, splashing on Benny's leg and flooding the floor. The creature placed the bowl under it and watched it fill up with liquid.

'It's sea water,' gasped Benny.

'Our gold water and your red blood,' gurgled the creature 'are surprisingly similar. Which is why,' it continued, 'I don't need to kill you. When I've had enough to drink, I can replace what I've taken with this.' Benny looked at the bowl in shock. 'With that,' agreed the creature, following her eyes.

'You can't...' said Benny, with as much power as she could manage.

'No?'

'I'll tell everyone. I'll tell them what you did.'

'I'm not sure you'll remember,' said the creature. It flicked its tongue quickly in and out. 'You'll be a slightly different person, once you've been diluted.'

'Different how?'

'Well, you'll probably offer to help me clear up the mess on the floor,' hissed the creature. 'People usually do. It's the *decent* thing, after all.'

'You've done this before,' gasped Benny. 'Alicia and Gwendolene. Is that why they started acting so strangely?'

'You don't die,' said the creature, impatiently. 'I create a better replica. You carry on doing your lessons, playing your sport, crying at your graduation ceremony. What's the difference?' Benny opened her mouth and screamed as loudly as she could. With a crash, the airlock doors opened and a girl rushed in. It was Darrell.

'Get away from her!' Darrell shouted. The creature whipped round to face her with bulging eyes. Darrell looked wildly around the room, picked up a pillow and threw it. The creature drew itself up to its full height and started to make a gulping, retching sound. Darrell collapsed onto the floor, crying noisily. Benny scrambled off the bed. Her face was smarting and she could only see out of one eye but it was enough to make out the bright red of the fire alarm on the wall. She reached out and smashed the glass with her fist. Instantly, a siren started to wail through the ward and out in all the corridors and dormitories. The creature dropped down on its belly and backed away from the girls, pushing itself along on its four short legs through the door into the next ward. Benny could just make out the sound of a window being pulled open.

'It's okay, Darrell,' she said, awkwardly. She wasn't sure if her friend could hear her above the sound of the alarm. Suddenly, Dr Thynne came rushing through the doors, her long hair loose and streaming down her back. She was wearing a white dressing gown that looked a bit like a towelling version of her labcoat. She stopped to take in Benny's face, Darrell quivering on the floor, the broken glass and the mess of yellow jelly.

'Bernice, where is the fire?' she asked.

'Not a fire,' said Benny. 'A big frog thing. It went through that door.' She pointed and Dr Thynne ran across the room after it. Benny sat on the floor next to her friend. Darrell had stopped crying and was sniffing noisily. Dr Thynne strode back into the room. She punched several numbers into the keypad below the fire alarm and the siren stopped.

'Where's Matron?' she asked. 'Everyone's assembling in the playground. I'll have to tell them it was a fire practice.' She glanced across at the window. 'At least I know we have good emergency

procedures in place.' She helped Darrell off the floor. The girls sat on Benny's bed as the teacher made a quick examination of Benny's stinging face.

'No lasting damage,' she concluded.

'Are we safe?' asked Benny.

'Of course we are,' said the headmistress. 'There's no fire, is there?'

'But the thing -'

'I saw it hopping across the courtyard, probably heading for the sea. It must have climbed out of the window. I doubt it will come back.'

'Should we go outside with the others?' asked Darrell.

'No,' said the headmistress. 'But I should, or there really will be a panic.' She picked up Benny's schoolsat and switched it to radio. 'Miss Petty, can you come up to the san, please. No, there's no fire. Tell the staff it's a routine check and keep the girls at their assembly points. I'll be down soon.' She put the device down.

'The deputy head will be up in a moment,' she said. 'Can I get you girls a glass of water?' Darrell nodded and the headmistress filled two paper cups from the cooler. Benny stared at the clear water, then at the yellow watery mess on the floor. Dr Thynne followed her eyes.

'I did see what I think I saw, didn't I?'

'If you saw a frog trying to eat me,' said Benny, irritably. Her whole face itched and she felt very tired.

'The Mal Oreille Giant Toad,' said the headmistress, reflectively. 'Very rare. And so hard to catch.' She stood by the airlock as if she couldn't quite make her mind up to leave the room. 'I have to go. The whole school's waiting for me outside. Miss Petty's on her way and Matron must be around here somewhere.' Benny realised that the teacher had completely missed the point.

'It was Matron,' she said.

'I'm sorry?'

'You asked where Matron was and you didn't let me reply,' said Benny, peevishly. 'It was Matron.'

'Bernice,' said the headmistress. She seemed to be considering what she was being told. 'We'll discuss this tomorrow.'

Benny woke up to the clean, white hum of the san. Her uniform had been washed and was hanging over the back of a chair. The headmistress was standing at the foot of the bed with a tray. On it was a small bottle of pink liquid and a plastic spoon.

'Good morning, Bernice,' she said, cheerfully. 'You look much better.'

'I feel a bit - ugh,' said Benny, wincing.

'Well, it might take a while before you feel completely back to normal,' said the headmistress. Benny put one hand up to her face. Her cheek was hot to the touch and very tender.

'Does it hurt?' asked the headmistress. Benny nodded.

'Can I look in a mirror?' she asked.

'I'll get you one in a minute. But I imagine it looks worse than it is. You were lucky the medical room had a supply of anti-venom. A list of Mal Oreille's flora and fauna would have been extensively consulted before this medical room was kitted out, but I don't think we've had to use any of *that* sort of stuff before.'

'You have anti-venom? For that thing?'

'Well, the planet's life forms are well documented and the lack of dangerous species on Mal Oreille was one of the main reasons this planet was chosen as a school site. The giant toad you saw last night lives far out at sea and rarely comes inland. It feeds on small mammals. It's not particularly intelligent and its poison isn't considered any more harmful to humans than, say, a sting ray.'

'Not intelligent?' said Benny. 'But -'

'Not intelligent,' said Dr Thynne. 'Ah, look. Here comes your friend. I decided to keep her in the san overnight too, just to be on the safe side.' Darrell padded round the corner. She was wearing a brown and orange dressing gown and slippers.

'Hi, Benny,' she said. 'Wow, look at your face.'

'I know,' said Benny. 'It was the toad's tongue.'

'What toad?' asked Darrell, looking confused.

'Now, Bernice,' said the headmistress, quickly. 'About the toad...'

'You know, Darrell,' said Benny. 'The toad that Matron turned into.'

'Ah, Matron,' cut in Dr Thynne. 'I had a message from her this morning. She apologised for leaving without telling anyone, but a member of her family was taken ill. She got the early shuttle yesterday morning.'

'No she didn't,' said Benny. 'She couldn't. She was here yesterday afternoon. She let me into the san.'

'I'm sorry, Bernice,' said the head. 'But that's not possible. I've talked to Darrell about the whole episode, and it sounds to me like there's a very simple explanation for all this. You were feeling ill in the night. Darrell took you to the san, but Matron wasn't there. Somehow, the toad had got in through an open window. You must have scared it and it lashed out at you.'

'Darrell,' said Benny. 'Tell her that's not true.'

But Darrell shook her head.

'I can't really remember,' she said. 'It sounds right, doesn't it?'

'How can you not remember?'

'Darrell was still quite distressed this morning,' said Dr Thynne. 'So I gave her some hazing medicine. In fact, I was just about to suggest that you had some too.' She picked up the medicine bottle from the tray, unscrewed the top and poured some pink syrup into a spoon.

'I don't understand,' said Benny, looking suspiciously at the proffered spoon. 'What did it do to Darrell?'

'The hazing medicine just blurs your memory a bit,' Dr Thynne smiled. 'It's perfectly safe. That's why Darrell's feeling so much better now.' Darrell smiled and nodded and Benny sank back into the pillows.

'So she was right,' she said. 'You do drug people.'

'Well, I wouldn't put it quite like that, dear,' said the headmistress, with a puzzled smile. 'But you are in the sanatorium. What did you expect?'

'Darrell wouldn't just take medicine like that,' said Benny. 'Her mum would have warned her. She's a doctor.'

'Yes, she was,' said the headmistress. 'And a good one by all accounts. *Good* doctors often recommend hazing medicine as the best treatment for severe shock.' Benny stared at her friend.

'She - was?' she asked, hesitantly.

'Mum died about a month ago, in an attack on the base she was working on,' said Darrell.

'But when you talk about her... I thought she... I'm sorry,' stuttered Benny.

'It's okay. I don't really remember much about it,' said Darrell. 'I remember everything about Mum from ages ago, but nothing more recent. It's better I think.'

'Well, why would you want such a nasty memory to be fresh?' asked the headmistress. 'The brain naturally dulls memories with time. The hazing drug just speeds up the process.'

'I don't want any,' scowled Benny. The headmistress sighed.

'Well, I'm not going to force you,' she said. 'Just let me know if you change your mind. Darrell, will you leave us alone please.' Darrell nodded and left the room, gently closing the door behind her.

'I shan't change my mind,' said Benny.

'All right, Bernice,' said the headmistress firmly, screwing the cap back on the bottle. 'I'm beginning to see that. And I'm sorry to tell you that we can't keep you here at Mal Oreille after what happened.'

'What?'

'I've made arrangements for you to leave the school, just as soon as you're feeling better. Permanently.'

'But why? I didn't do anything wrong,' choked Benny. 'Dad's going to kill me,' she added miserably.

'I doubt he'll be very pleased,' said the headmistress. 'But with your school record it will hardly come as a shock.'

'You haven't told him yet?'

'I've been trying to get in touch with him all night, but no one on the base seems to know where he is or be able to contact him for us.'

'But... I... I'm sorry,' said Benny, desperately. 'I didn't mean to upset anybody.'

'I'm sorry too, Bernice,' said the headmistress. 'But it doesn't look like you're going to fit in here. You're not like the other girls.'

'No,' said Benny. 'But the other girls aren't really like the other girls either, if you see what I mean? They're like that because the toad... I mean, Matron...'

'That's enough about Matron,' said the headmistress sharply. 'What's going to happen when she comes back to school? Will you continue to persecute her?'

'She's coming back?' asked Benny, aghast.

'Of course she is. As soon as I can catch her.' The headmistress coughed. 'I mean, as soon as I can catch up with her. She's been a valuable member of staff for quite a while now. I don't know what I'd do without her. You modern girls are so... unruly.'

Benny sank back into the pillows as the teacher's words sank in.

'I'll leave you to rest for now,' said the headmistress. 'But you do see my point, I think?' Benny nodded. Dr Thynne gave a tight-lipped smile as she left the room. The doors swished shut and Benny was alone again.

Come and get me, Dad, she thought. Where are you? Come and take me away, now. I want to go home.

The Evacuation of Bernice Summerfield Considered as a Short Film by Terry Gilliam

Ben Aaronovitch

While she was waiting, the girl passed the time by counting the thermonuclear warheads as they went gliding by. They were only baby nukes with a maximum yield of barely over a megaton, and came six to a crate. The crates themselves were of impact-resistant carbon composite with rounded corners and painted a high-visibility orange. Their sides were festooned with a series of decals which translated into warnings about radiation, biohazard, corrosive chemicals, explosives and the fact that thermonuclear warheads were potentially dangerous if used improperly. Below the warnings was the Sunmaker corporate logo, a solar disc with the beaming face of a baby, and their motto: 'Let a Little Sunshine Into Your Life.' Each crate had an electronic tag, a simple chip and transmitter, that remembered what it was and where it was supposed to go.

The girl had exactly the same kind of tag pinned to the lapel of her travelling coat. The freight tag had logged into the station's traffic management system as soon as the *Star of Lucknow* had docked, and the girl had been guided across the concourse and into a lift by happy toon-faced holograms. They led her down a series of corridors, each one greyer and narrower than the last, and then across a vast shadowy concourse, dimly lit and unused. Finally she came to the

waiting room where, with an admonishment to wait where she was, her friendly Loon guides abandoned her.

She was aware that grown-ups didn't have to wear freight tags when they travelled, but she felt no resentment. Six months ago she would have resented it - but then, six months ago, she would have been travelling with her father, or at least one of his aides. These days she was careful to feel as little as possible.

The waiting room was long and narrow, the dimensions of a monorail carriage, with rows of benches fixed into the floor. One wall was made entirely of decompression-rated transparent plastic, behind which robotic pallets moved cargos in through one gate and out through another. The girl chose a bench facing the window, hunched into her travelling coat and watched the weapons of mass destruction gliding by.

She idly wondered where her own luggage had gone, her two flight cases and the travelling bag with a picture of Nana the Noisy Elephant on the front. Each piece had its own freight tag, each presumably as important as she was. The girl thought they were probably already aboard the next ship - she hadn't bothered to learn its name - stacked in a cabin with Nana the Noisy Elephant rolling her eyes and trumpeting at carefully random intervals.

The warheads were followed by the sections of a disassembled particle cannon and then by bundles of aluminium rods bound together with duct tape. The girl became thirsty. At first she tried to ignore the sensation, but it quickly became intolerable. Fortunately there was a water fountain at the far end of the waiting room so she didn't have to move far, and she quickly returned to her seat. Hunger came soon after, but hunger was much easier to ignore. Besides, she was beginning to like that hollowed-out feeling, as if her skin were drawn taught across the contours of her chest, and the delicious tickle of her bones poking out against her underwear.

A steward on the *Star of Lucknow* had noticed her thinness and had been concerned enough to take her to the ship's doctor. The doctor had asked her whether she was eating, and the girl had said she was. It wasn't lying, because the doctor hadn't specified an exact timeframe for when the eating took place. The girl had done a lot of eating when her mother had been alive - more than enough eating for one lifetime, she felt.

The doctor hadn't believed her and had instructed the computer to monitor her consumption. But computers were easy enough to fool. She left the luxury liner lighter than when she'd got on.

Now she was alone and there were no grown-ups to tell her to eat.

Because she was ignoring time, she couldn't tell how long it was before she noticed the man who was watching her. His appearance was startling, but the girl had spent months schooling herself in the art of non-reaction, so she didn't scream and jump onto her seat. Instead she studied him sidelong and pretended indifference. The man had a long thin nose set in a long pale face topped by a tall narrow, red-and-black-striped top hat. His body was long and narrow and his arms and legs were impossibly elongated, elbows and knees bent and jutting as he stopped, halfway in through the waiting room door, staring at the girl with his head tilted to one side.

Then he came all the way into the waiting room, not walking upright but instead insinuating himself forward with long sly movements of his limbs. The girl envied him the stick thinness of his arms and legs, but not his fashion sense - which was all red and black stripes. He moved like a spider, the girl decided, and once she'd thought that then that was what he became - the Spider.

The Spider slipped sideways out of her sight. The girl didn't like that, but keeping him in view would have required her to turn her head and that was against the rules. She stared resolutely back at the pallets passing past the transparent wall, but they were no help - nothing but stacks of identical grey and blue crates. They could have contained boots, toilet paper - anything.

How long would it take the Spider, with his long slow gait, to make his way down the backs of the seats until he was behind the girl's chair? He would come crouching so that his knees and elbows flashed up and down like pistons, his top hat held jauntily upright like the chimney on a steam train.

There, the girl thought she heard it; the Spider's breathing, chuffing like a locomotive. Would he stop when he reached the back of her chair, stop and turn to breathe down her neck? Would his breath be hot or cold? Warm, she decided, the last exhalations from a firebox.

She kept her eyes fixed on the passing crates, reading their markings, praying for a distraction, but they were all marked PX. Just civilian stuff for some base somewhere; ice cream and basketballs, colouring kits and T-shirts, Nana the Noisy Elephant and all her friendly friends - collect them ALL!

The girl had only got as far as Gerry the Gentle Giraffe, and he had been lost during the orbital attack, along with her beetle collection and grandmama's silver spoon.

The transparent wall was laminated to prevent reflections, but

there was just enough for the girl to glimpse the top hat rising up above her head and a long-fingered hand scuttling along the backs of the chairs towards her face. She wanted weapons but there was nothing but materiel behind the wall.

'Stop that!'

The voice made her turn her head. In the doorway stood a large man in a red woollen waistcoat, cream jodhpurs and black riding boots. The skin of his face was blotched and wrinkled and topped with a mass of unrealistically curly blond hair.

'Get away from that child.' Confusingly the man had a woman's voice, an expressive if shop-worn contralto. 'Don't think I don't know what you're thinking.'

The Spider popped up halfway down the row of seats, his long face rising like the moon, his eyes wide and innocent. He looked at the man in the doorway, then back at the girl and gave her a weak grin.

When the man strode in towards her, the girl could see that he was definitely a woman. She walked, the girl decided, like an old woman who still thought she was young. In her right hand she held a black leather riding crop, which she slapped against her thigh as she approached the girl and bent down to study her. Close up, her face looked even more wrinkly, although the girl noticed that the curly blonde hair wasn't a wig - perhaps it was a transplant.

'What's your name, child?'

The girl wanted to speak but she seemed to have forgotten how.

said the woman, 'I know you. You're the Girl with Nothing to Say.'

The girl tried coughing. It was frustrating - she'd never had trouble speaking before.

'My name,' said the woman, 'is Pandemonium Jack. But you can call me Bedlam.' She beckoned Spider over. 'And this is...'

'Spider,' said the girl.

'Spider,' said Bedlam. 'Yes - of course he is.'

'Spider,' said Spider, and grinned to reveal long, pointed teeth.

'And what are you doing here?' asked Bedlam.

'Waiting,' said the girl.

'And why are you waiting here?'

The girl considered telling them about the chip and the toon-faced holograms, the Star of Lucknow, the corridors and the frightening shadows of the deserted concourse, but why should she? These weren't her parents or friends of her parents. They certainly were not, she dimly understood, authorised personnel.

'It's a waiting room,' she said.

Bedlam gave her an approving look.

'Good answer,' she said, and turned to Spider. 'Go and fetch the others.'

Spider hissed and bobbed his head and jerked his pointed chin in the girl's direction.

'Oh, don't worry about her,' said Bedlam. 'She's the Girl with Nothing to Say - we know all about children like her.'

Spider hissed and bobbed a couple more times and then went scuttling off.

'Oh, my,' said Bedlam, indicating the transparent wall. 'You don't see many of those these days.'

The girl looked. It was an obsolete bushbaby dropship, its stubby wings latched into the upright position, cockpit windows and compressor intakes sealed over with permaspray. She couldn't see the weapon pylons, so the craft was probably civilianised - outfitted for some boondock colony on the other side of the Coalsack. Not military then, but close enough to hold her attention.

'Pilots loved them,' said Bedlam. 'Drop them, rock them, fly them in methane, oxygen and CO2 don't make no difference. Grunts and squaddies love them, watch them come down out of the sky doing the Sarajevo tango and the Basra two-step. Bushbaby, bushbaby carry me away.'

The girl with nothing to say said nothing.

'Don't mind me,' said Bedlam. 'I've got a *stick* in a *slick* coming and the LZ has to be ready.'

The bushbaby was followed by stacks of orbital harpoons, each one encased in its own ferrous sabot - ready for the rail gun. The average operational load of a fire support ship was six thousand harpoons so the girl expected to be occupied for a long time.

'What's she doing here?' asked a voice as loud as a klaxon.

Harpoons were kinetic energy weapons. You dropped them from orbit and the differential between orbital velocity and ground velocity gave them a killing mass on impact. A green weapon, in planning terms, no nasty radioactive residue to be dealt with when the ground forces moved in. Very eco-friendly.

'I'll just ask her then,' said the klaxon voice.

An enormously round clown rolled to a stop in front of the girl. He wore a white frilly shirt with red buttons and a vast pair of trousers held up with scarlet braces. The trousers didn't appear to have any legs at all. Instead, the clown had the traditional big shoes mounted

on a pair of small wheels so that when he moved it was with a slap, slap, slap of leather on lino. The head was wrong too: white, cone-shaped with three tufts of blue hair. The clown mouth was drawn happy but the real mouth hung open revealing a speaking grill.

The girl was insulted. The clown was obviously a construct, kissing cousin to the teaching machines and the toon-faced holograms. Nana the Noisy Elephant was more convincing. Grown-ups, the girl had noticed, were never told what to do by machines - it was only other machines and little children had to do what they were told.

'I'm Mr Custard,' shouted the clown. 'Would you like something to eat?'

It wasn't difficult for the girl to ignore Mr Custard, because although its bulk was easily adequate to carry a warhead she couldn't see it as a viable delivery system. The slapping of the shoes alone would undermine any other stealth characteristics.

Mr Custard spoke again, but this time it was just noise.

Her father had said you couldn't rely on the machines - not when it came to making decisions under pressure. Not when it was a split-second decision. Not when you were facing an enemy that never hesitated or showed a trace of fear.

Her father said that you had to know the capabilities of your delivery systems and the performance envelope of your weapon's platform as well as you knew how high you could jump or how far you could throw a ball.

Nine metres - clear across the backyard at the house on Beta Caprisis - straight into her mother's cricketer's mitten.

A smell, sweet and meaty, made her gag, and a hissing voice by her ear said 'Longpork', and sniggered.

 said Bedlam. 'Leave that poor orphan alone.'

'I am not an Orphan,' screamed the girl. She found herself on her feet, fists clenched, face hot, betrayed into movement by her own self.

Spider gave a startled cry and scuttled behind a row of seats. Mr Custard recoiled - only Bedlam stood her ground. Beside her stood a stunted little man with a round pink face, a white chef's hat and plastic apron. No doubt this was Longpork. The girl was shocked to see that Longpork was grilling sausages over an open fire.

'You can't do that,' said the girl. 'That's an unauthorised naked flame. This is a space station, a closed system - do you know how dangerous that is?'

 knows,' said Bedlam. 'Don't you, Longpork?'

Longpork shook his griddle and made the sausages sizzle. The smell made her gag.

'Oh, yes,' said Longpork. 'How smooth the walls look - but behind, all those pipes full of volatiles and insulation foam. You think you've found the seat, but the flames skip and smoulder and scurry like rats. Oh, how they sighed on *Rock of Ages* out of Olympus - five days they fought that fire - six thousand marines and two hundred crew. On the fifth day they opened the ventral decks to vacuum, sacrificed ten per cent, but it didn't work. In the end they had to jettison the passenger sections to save the crew; nine hundred made it back to the big Mountain. Once they were safely docked the Captain took a stroll out an unsealed airlock - for how could any person live with that?'

The girl stared at the little man. Her parents had talked about the *Rock of Ages* once, and what to do if you saw fire on a starship.

'Were you there?' asked the girl.

'In a manner of speaking,' said Longpork. 'Of course, once you get the stink of burnt flesh in your nostrils it never completely leaves you. And there are some that even grow to like it - claim that it's biological imperative from back when protein was scarce.'

The horrible little man giggled, produced a long-handled fork and deftly skewered a sausage. He offered it to the girl with a flourish. She recoiled at the smell.

'Don't look like that,' said Bedlam. 'It's vat grown - like everything else around here.'

Longpork waved the sausage at the girl, but she had recovered her poise, her control. It was all about control, letting the universe know who was boss.

No, thank you,' she said. 'I'm not hungry.'

Spider giggled, his long nose bobbing up and down.

'Oh, she's lying,' said Longpork.

'But at least she has good manners,' said Bedlam. 'Which makes a refreshing change.'

'They don't pay us for our manners,' said Longpork.

Spider giggled again - this was obviously an old joke.

'Who are you?' asked the girl.

'I think we told you,' said Bedlam.

'What are you doing here?'

'Entertainment,' shouted Mr Custard.

'We are travelling players,' said Bedlam. 'The vicissitudes of conflict can cast a pall over the most robust of soldiery.' She gestured at her companions. 'We endeavour in our small way to bring a modicum of comfort to those who have been tossed into the maelstrom of conflict by the arbitrary cruelty of fate.'

'Cruel fate,' said Longpork.

Spider's mouth drooped mournfully.

The girl took a moment to think the sentence through. 'Are you saying you're with EASE?' she asked. Extrasolar Armed Services Entertainment had had an outpost on every base the girl had lived on. They did shows all over known space, the girl remembered, pantomimes and shows that her mother wouldn't let her go to. 'Booty for the troops,' her mother had said. 'You wouldn't like it.' She'd never found out why.

She remembered a puppet show. They let the kids touch the puppets before the show so that you knew it was real and not some common hologram or suchlike. Big stars did EASE gigs, and when one was coming you could feel the excitement on the base for weeks before.

'Exactly,' said Bedlam. 'We travel from place to place and put on shows - just like Manny Bancroft.'

The girl knew about Manny Bancroft, the force's favourite comedian. His catchphrase had been, 'I'll be right behind you guys. Two or three light years - tops.'

'If you're lucky,' said Longpork. 'You might just get to eat him. Did I say eat - I meant meet.'

But the girl had remembered that Manny had been killed last year. 'Not far enough behind,' her mother had said to her father. It was the sort of thing she said when she'd forgotten her daughter was listening. Her father had given her a warning look - he never forgot where the girl was. He never forgot where anything was.

'Do you have identification?' asked the girl. If they were really with EASE then they would have official ID cards colour-coded by service - white for navy, tan for the army, khaki for the marines and light blue for logistics. The girl's own card was orange, for dependants, and tucked carefully into an inside pocket of her travelling coat.

In doubt about a grown up she was always supposed to ask for their identification - it was a rule.

'Identification?' asked Spider.

'We don't need no stinking papers,' said Spider.

'I'm afraid that we operate outside of the remit of the official military,' said Bedlam. 'Alas, in this materialistic age the services we offer have little hope of official sanction, and we are reduced to offering our entertainment in rude and informal settings. Such are the tribulations of the strolling player, for we offer our very essence as sacrifice to the verities and receive so very little in recompense.'

Bedlam struck a pose.

But we are ready to do our bit for our nation and our species.' she said. 'For we are the last line of entertainment before the dark - we are the Circus of War.'

'*Cirque du Guerre*,' said Spider.

Unauthorised personnel, thought the girl - this could be tricky. Like the transients that her mother collected money for - people that slipped from world to world and station to station by Nagging lifts off free traders or hiding in cargo containers. Millions of men and women, her mother had said, possibly hundreds of millions.

When the girl had asked whether any were children, her mother had told her not to worry about it and changed the subject. That meant, in the girl's experience, that the answer was yes - lots of children. She'd made a point of helping collect old toys for the next midwinter festival giveaway. Mother said that it didn't matter if the toys were broken on the outside. It was the control chips that were expensive; new bodies could be fabricated anywhere. Just like old soldiers, her dad had said.

It dawned upon the girl that Bedlam, Longpork and Spider were not only unauthorised personnel but possibly also unauthorised people. And if they were unauthorised then that would make them the worst kind of people - the kind that worked for *them*, the *monsters*, the Enemy.

Her father had given her clear instructions on what to do if she encountered unauthorised people. She was to remain calm and, being careful not to alert them to her suspicions, vacate the area. Once she was safely away she was to warn the authorities.

Her father had stressed the importance of not being caught or killed.

'A soldier,' her father had said, 'must be prepared at any moment to not lay down his life for his people. They must make the Enemy pay the maximum possible price for their life - the Enemy must understand that, of all possible options it might consider, starting hostilities will be the most expensive.'

'I should go,' said the girl.

'But you haven't eaten,' said Longpork. 'And I know you want to.'

He was wrong; just the thought of eating was making her gag.

Bedlam, the others and their fire completely blocked the gap between the seats and the glass wall. The girl thought that she might be able to jump over the seat backs and run down the empty aisle between the next two rows. That would be suspicious and they might

chase her. The thought of what might happen if she was caught by Longpork filled her with a sick fear.

'I'm getting some water,' said the girl.

'Okay,' said Bedlam. 'Fine by us.'

The girl turned and walked to the water fountain at the far end of the waiting room. She would drink, wait until they were distracted and then walk calmly up the clear aisle to the exit.

The girl bent her head and let the stream of water brush her lips. If she turned too soon they would still be watching her; if she left it too long then they would check to see what she was up to. The trick would be to walk calmly at an average walking pace and hope that normality would make her invisible long enough to reach the exit.

The girl straightened, turned and stopped still. The whole width of the waiting room was filled with a mass of figures, some in costume, some in old-fashioned suits, all with baggage. Her access to the exit was blocked.

The rest of the circus had arrived.

The girl was never sure how many of them there were. They were too tall to see over, and crouching down all she could see was a thicket of legs.

The girl couldn't see Bedlam, but she could hear her voice - on the left, by the glass wall - so the girl chose to try the aisle on the right. The first obstacle that way was a group of men lounging amongst piles of metal-edged flight cases. They all had long hair and beards and dressed in long blue serge greatcoats. One of them, the nearest to the girl, was tuning an old-fashioned acoustic guitar. Another was sucking on a white paper tube.

'Excuse me,' said the girl, 'but I need to get past.'

The hairy man removed the white tube from his mouth and stared at her owlishly.

'We shall not be moved,' he said. As he spoke, blue smoke poured from his mouth.

'Like a tree, man,' said the man with the guitar. 'Standing by the water side.'

'We're the Immovables,' said the smoking man.

'That's the name of our band,' said the guitar man.

'We used to be the Invisibles,' said the smoking man. 'But then we realised it was all true.' He passed the white tube to the guitar man, who sucked deeply on it before handing it back. 'We just wanted peace and love.'

'Especially love,' squeaked the guitar man.

The blue smoke was aromatic, like burning leaves rather than burning wood.

'Why did you come here, then?' asked the girl.

'Letter came for us telling us to come down to Whitehall Street to be injected, inspected, rejected and selected,' said the guitar man.

'We lit off for Canada,' said the smoking man. 'And we never stopped moving after that.'

'Wherever we're needed, dude,' said the guitar man. 'That's where we'll be.'

'Doing cover versions of Arlo Guthrie and P. F. Sioan,' said the smoking man.

'And Johnny Chess,' said the guitar man and played a chord.

'Because we're groovy cats and move with the times.'

'But not too much,' said the smoking man. 'On account of us being like - the Immovables.'

The girl thought she could see a gap between the guitar man's knees and the smoking man's flight case and tried to squeeze past.

'Hey,' said the guitar man. 'Uncool, little girl. Find your own way out.'

Smoking man blew smoke in her face - making her cough.

As she had been taught to do, the girl stepped back and assessed her options.

Perhaps, she thought, she could crouch down low and crawl through their legs. She had been a champion wriggler when she was younger and had often squeezed under the tables at boring grown-up parties, especially during the speeches that seemed such a feature of her parents' life. Her father was always giving them. He said it was because of morale, something that he spent a lot of time worrying about.

Or she could pretend that the back of the seats was a balance bar and walk along it. Being careful to avoid people's heads, of course. The problem being that the girl had never been that good at balance bars - she always got distracted and fell off.

'Don't be absurd, child,' said a voice behind her. 'None of those schemes have a hope of succeeding. You're never going to get out of here unless you buck up your ideas.'

The girl turned, expecting another grotesque, and found instead a plump, middle-aged woman with curly hair and sparkling blue eyes. The girl was immediately suspicious. A social worker from Civilian Services, she thought. A grown-up with an electronic

clipboard full of problems, each with its own pull-down menu of solutions.

'Who are you?' asked the girl.

'I'm the Pythia,' said the woman.

'Are you from Civilian Services?'

'No,' said the Pythia. 'I'm with the circus.'

The girl didn't believe her. Grown-ups from CS didn't always tell the truth; sometimes they just told you what you wanted to hear, so you'd do what they wanted you to do. It was always tricky working out which adults were lying to you and why. After her mum had died she'd been visited by a woman from CS who wore a white tab on the front of her collar. The woman had said that there was always hope and that her mum would want her to eat her dinner. The girl had been outraged, as if this woman would have known what Mum wanted. Mum frequently forgot breakfast altogether, or just had a sandwich standing up. It was Father, when he was home, who insisted that they sat down for dinner.

'What do you do?'

'I foretell the future,' said the Pythia. 'It is my curse to see what is to come but to never be believed.'

'What's going to happen then?' asked the girl. Her father had had views on destiny and time travel.

'You're not going to believe me,' said the Pythia. 'It is my fate to speak that which others dare not speak, to have the courage to say the truth in the face of institutional neglect and inadequate resourcing of my department. For nation shall speak unto nation.'

'Speak,' said the girl. 'Unto me,' she added, just in case.

'There's going to be a huge war and millions of people are going to die,' said the Pythia.

The girl thought about this. 'Worse than the war we're already in?' she asked.

'Possibly,' said the Pythia. 'Could be, definitely. Certainly the public will perceive it as being worse. and in a way, that's more important.'

'More important than being dead?' asked the girl.

The Pythia waved away the question. 'Who are you?' she asked.

'I'm the Girl with Nothing to Say,' said the girl - just in case the Pythia was a social worker in disguise.

'One of *those*,' said the Pythia. and sniffed. 'There's a lot of that about these days.'

'A lot of what?'

'Girls with nothing to say.'

'Well, your predictions aren't any good,' said the girl. 'Make another one.'

'Human misery will transcend all our efforts to contain it,' said the Pythia.

'What does that mean?' asked the girl.

'For a girl with nothing to say,' said the Pythia, 'you seem to have a lot to say.'

Bedlam appeared at their side. 'Take no notice of Cassandra here,' she said. 'She's been spouting this stuff since the Trojan wars.'

'Please let me leave,' said the girl.

'You might as well sit down and get comfortable,' said Bedlam. 'The show's about to start.'

Bedlam led the girl to a seat and waited patiently until she was settled.

'You are blessed above all other small irritating girls,' said Bedlam. 'For there are few as get to see the Cirque du Guerre while living.'

Then she jammed a top hat down upon her curls and cried in a great voice - 'Places everybody please.'

Around her the circus began to bustle. The Immovables threw off their greatcoats to reveal blue velvet smoking jackets and ruffled shirts. They pulled guitars, trombones and fiddles from their gun cases while Longpork took up a silver tuba twice as tall as he was. Spider's long fingers held aloft a pair of hand-painted maracas - the left depicting Ixtlilton, god of healing, festivals and musicians; on the right was painted Teoyaomicqui, he who watches over the souls of dead warriors.

Behind them a giant clam shell opened to reveal a fountain of electric Kool-Aid in which a mermaid basked. The mermaid had green eyes and nacreous skin the colour of mother of pearl. When she sang it was with the seductive and deadly voice of the sea.

'Who are they playing for?' asked the girl. But Bedlam had left her side to take her place, as conductor, in front of the assembled circus. The girl realised that the musicians all faced the transparent wall and the automated cargo slide.

Bedlam raised her arm. 'Liberty Bell,' she called to the circus. 'And this time with *feeling*.'

The girl didn't recognise the tune, although she thought it must be a marching song. The circus played so badly she couldn't be sure whether this was because she didn't know the music or not. They certainly played with gusto and the occasional squirt of white-wash. Of all the circus only the Pythia stood aloof - arms folded, watching

the cargo pallets go by. The girl followed the line of her gaze and realised, with a shock, that people were riding the cargo pallets on the other side of the wall.

Still, it wasn't until she saw Gabriella that she realised she was watching the dead go past. Before that she had just assumed that the men and women she saw were hitching a ride on the automated cargo transfer system. Although she had thought it odd that children were being allowed to ride as well - her mother had often insisted that it was a terribly dangerous thing to do.

Gabriella had been a party friend, a girl from school that you invited to make up the numbers on your birthday or because your mother assumed that because you were in the same study group you must be best friends forever. The girl knew that Gabriella liked 3D construction sets and had wanted, from before she could remember, to be a media face. She also knew that Gabriella had been one of the children who failed to make the shelter on Beta Caprisis. Although she hadn't worked that out until halfway through the memorial service, when she'd seen Gabriella's mother crying. She'd thought it terribly unfair that her mother had died instead of Gabriella's. After all, *she* was the one that still needed a mother. She felt that the universe must be terribly disorganised to allow such a mismatch to happen.

The girl knew exactly what happened to a person if they got caught in a plasma bombardment. Grown-ups were careful not to use the word in front of the kids. but it was playground certified anyhow - the word was vaporised. All the little bits that you were made from were blown in a million different directions at once. Vaporised was what happened to people in space battles, vaporised is what was supposed to have happened to her father - although the girl didn't believe it.

Gabriella didn't look vaporised as she sat on a crate full of miniature tokamaks; she looked just the same as she did the last time the girl had seen her. The only odd thing about her was that she was wearing a uniform, a child-sized version of the Navy's undress whites. There were a couple of other children riding the pallet with Gabriella and they were wearing uniforms too. The girl thought she recognised one of them. a boy in marine green. another casualty of Beta Caprisis.

The circus had changed tempo. The marching music had given way to a slow lament sung by the mermaid, accompanied by one of the immovables on guitar. It was a sad tune and something in it made the

girl conscious that Gabriella had once been her friend - even it she wasn't a close one.

She got up and banged on the wall, but Gabriella didn't seem to hear. She hit harder and a for a moment she thought she saw a flicker of movement as if Gabriella had glanced her way. Then the pallet slid gently off into the far tunnel.

Since the girl knew that Gabriella was dead it could mean only one thing - the dead were riding the automated cargo pallets. It actually made a weird kind of sense. They could hardly ride the passenger service with the living - think of the smell.

'Yes,' said the Pythia. 'They're the dead.'

The girl watched as a pallet full of men and women in armoured cavalry blacks slid past. Their faces were blank and expressionless. That made sense to the girl as well; if she were dead she would try to be as blank as that. She watched them pass - envious of their poise.

'Where are they all going,' she asked.

'Home,' said the Pythia.

'Where's that?' asked the girl.

'Nobody knows,' said the Pythia. 'Except, presumably, for them, and I suspect they only know when they get there.'

'How do they get there?' asked the girl.

'They seep through the cracks of reality,' said the Pythia. 'The same way water creeps through rock. As water seeks a planet's sea level so people seek the meridian of their lives.'

'Why do you play music for them?'

'Entertaining the dead is the price we pay,' said the Pythia. 'If we want to seep through the same cracks as they do, we must sing for our supper.'

'My mother says you shouldn't mix metaphors,' said the girl.

'Your mother *said*,' said the Pythia. 'Past tense. Your mother is dead.'

The girl flinched. She felt oddly betrayed - no grown-up had said that to her since it had happened. 'Gone', they said, or 'passed on'. They were careful about what they told her and the girl had been grateful for their consideration. Hadn't she?

'Yes she is,' said the girl. Then she realised that it wasn't something that she'd talked about. 'How do you know?'

'There she goes now,' said the Pythia and pointed.

If she'd had a chance to think about it, to prepare, the girl wouldn't have looked. With a bit of warning she could have steeled herself and kept her eyes fixed on the Pythia's face, but she didn't get any warning and so she looked.

There was her mother riding on a cargo pallet full of twenty-millimetre sabot rounds. She looked pale and disinterested and was dressed in the crisp white dress uniform of a naval officer.

The girl threw herself at the transparent wall, banging with her fists as hard as she could. She couldn't tell if she made a noise or not, not with the banging of the bass drum and the hit-and-miss bellow of the circus's brass section. If she did make a noise, her mother either didn't hear her or was indifferent. The girl watched the pale figure ride her cases of ammunition out of sight.

She paused, panting like an animal - and then she hit the glass again. 'Let me through,' she screamed.

'Stop it,' said the Pythia. 'You'll hurt your hands.'

The girl stepped back.

'If at first you don't succeed,' she said and ran head first at the transparent wall.

The impact blacked out her vision and set her staggering backwards. She didn't wait for the pain to arrive, instead she ran at the wall again. This time her head rang with a muted clang, just like the sound the old sheet-metal water trough used to make when she'd hit it with a stick. The pain overtook her and she threw up, and not in a good way either.

Still, she was certain she'd felt something give, the wall or her, it didn't matter which. She got herself ready for the last charge, head down, death or glory, *semper fi*, eyes on the prize - stay on target.

It occurred to her then, just for a moment, that it was odd that the grown-ups didn't try to stop her. Surely that's what grown-ups did, stop you from hurting yourself. Wasn't that what grown-ups were for?

The girl looked up and around, just in case a grown-up was planning to intervene at the last minute. The circus was watching her, all of them silent except for Spider, who quietly snickered.

'You don't think I can do it,' said the girl.

Bedlam shrugged.

The girl turned back to the transparent wall.

And then she saw Manray.

Her mother had called Manray her father's protégé which, after she'd looked it up in a dictionary, would have upset the girl except for one thing. Lieutenant Manray was to die for. From the first time her father had brought him home on leave the girl had known that here was the man that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. A silly schoolgirl crush, the girl thought now, that had driven her mother to distraction.

He was still gorgeous while travelling with the dead. Riding a pallet full of naval torpedoes - the smart new ones, the girl noted smugly, with the enhanced AI and the terminal guidance sensors. As blank-faced and sharply uniformed as the rest, there was, nonetheless, just a hint of his style as he leaned casually against the warheads.

Manray had given her a nickname and had brought her the interesting presents when visiting on leave: the mollusc shell with the integrated circuit and the section of the optical storage disc that Mother said was five hundred years old. When he came to dinner the girl used to stare across the table at him - forgetting to eat.

'It's your dress sense,' she'd heard her father tell Manray once.

The girl had once manoeuvred her mother into letting Manray read her bedtime story. She'd made him read her favourite, the one about the princess with the magic powers - she liked it because the princess was not only smart and magical but also a crack shot. She'd sat upright in her bed, wide awake and intoxicated with his nearness.

Despite broad hints and parental grimaces from the bedroom door, the girl had refused to go to sleep. Manray had read right to the end of the book. She'd pleaded for another but Manray told her not to push it. He kissed her gently on the forehead and left her alone.

And Manray had been with her father on the last operation. And if he was dead?

The girl sat down on the floor and started to cry - her head hurt.

'Spider kiss it better,' whispered a voice by her ear. She didn't even flinch.

Spider's long nose slid into view before her. His mouth was turned down and his eyes mournful. 'Everybody dies,' said Spider. 'Why wait?'

'My father isn't dead,' said the girl. 'If he was really dead then Manray would have been with him.'

Spider said nothing, but he did hand the girl a handkerchief. She gave it a surreptitious inspection and then used it to wipe her eyes. Spider tenderly kissed her bruised forehead and miraculously, later the next day, it did feel better.

The girl checked beyond the transparent wall where rows of anonymous crates were sliding past. She recognised the colour codes on the tags. It was civilian stuff - the dead had gone.

The circus was packing up as well. The Immovables were back in their greatcoats and standing with instrument cases at their feet - still passing the burning white tube one to another. Longpork had doused his grill and was inserting sausages into hotdog buns. A line

of wrapped hotdogs was laid across a packing case. Longpork caught the girl watching and winked.

'Look just like casualties waiting for the corpse train, don't they?' he said. 'Cooked, bagged and ready to eat.' Then he scooped the wrapped hotdogs into a clear plastic bag printed with the words *this face towards enemy*.

The Pythia donned a tasteful Burberry coat and gave the girl a cheerful wave. 'Remember,' she said. 'Nothing good lasts for long and in the end it's all completely without meaning.' Then she stepped onto the cargo platform, oozing through the transparent wall as if it were just a low-level force field. The Immovables went next, pushing the mermaid's clamshell ahead of them.

The lead guitarist paused and held up his hand with two fingers extended. '*Whiter Shade of Pale*, man,' he said. 'It's all in the second verse.'

Longpork trundled his disgusting cart through the transparent wall. He didn't look back, which annoyed the girl more than she thought it should. Spider slid his limbs through the wall like a long-legged swimmer cautiously entering the water. He gave the girl a last wistful look and then he was gone.

Bedlam left last, but before she went she beckoned the girl over. She leant down until her seamed face was close to the girl's.

'You could come with us, you know,' she said. 'We always have room for more. You could be the amazing skeleton girl, the one who wasted away because she had nothing to say.'

'No thank you,' said the girl. 'I don't think I have a future with the dead.' Then she worried that Bedlam might find this rude, but Bedlam just laughed and slipped something in her pocket.

'Everybody has a future with the dead,' said Bedlam. 'But I don't plan to wait up for you.' She straightened and, sweeping off her hat, executed a bow. 'Au revoir,' she said, and stepped through the wall.

The girl checked the cargo slide, but there was nothing - not even submunitions. She tapped the wall, but it felt not the least bit permeable.

She went and sat back down on her chair.

Fresh pallets of thermonuclear weapons passed by. These were bigger than the Sunmaker babies, variable yields that could be set as high as thirty megatons. The kind of bomb the pilots called base busters - used to destroy fortified targets on planets or asteroids. These particular weapons were generic knock-offs made by a company the girl didn't recognise.

She wondered where the circus might be going next.

more pallets of thermonuclear weapons slid past, but the girl found it hard to stay interested. She reached into her pocket and, cautiously, pulled out the package. It was a ham sandwich in a triangular plastic sandwich case. According to the label the bread was iodine supplemented, the meat was guaranteed vat grown and as free of additives as a summer's morn.

The girl cracked open the case, examined the limp white triangle for a moment, and then took a bite. She finished the rest in three more bites and when she had finished tears were streaming down her cheeks - it tasted that wonderful.

She considered saving the second half of the sandwich for later, but realised that would be absurd. She did eat it slowly, carefully chewing every mouthful. Then she got up and left the waiting room.

She walked alone across the shadowy concourse, back through the corridors, into the lift which whisked her back up to the noise and hustle of the main deck. Nearby she could see a row of public terminals beneath the holographic swan logo of Transcolonial Liners. She used the terminal to check the berthing location of her ship and set off to find it.

Halfway across the deck a toon-faced hologram moved to intercept her, but the girl walked straight through it. It kept pace with her for the next twenty metres - bleating something about proper protocols - but the girl wasn't about to take orders from a machine any more.

She found the correct boarding gate for her ship and presented herself to the uniformed purser who guarded it.

'Good afternoon,' she said politely. 'I believe I have a reservation on your ship.'

The purser gave her an encouraging smile. 'Do you now?'

'Yes,' said the girl. 'My name is Bernice Summerfield.'

The purser checked his booking screen.

'Are you accompanied?' he asked.

'No,' said Benny. 'I'm travelling on my own.'

The Tunnels to Heaven

Andy Bodle

1

Inside the Tabernacle, you could almost forget that the world was ending.

All was still but for the occasional passing functionary. The Reminder Screens were projecting the same old slogans. The Facilitator at the desk was reciting her Tenets as if today were a day like any other.

Not that there were many signs of apocalypse remaining outside. The Oppressors had done a typically efficient job of quelling the disorder, terminating all the insurgents and everyone the insurgents had spoken to in the previous two cycles. The thoroughfares stood empty now; most Rotiferans were shut away in their family compounds, waiting for the news from the Synod that the Sickness had passed and life could go on as before.

But not Barely-Above-Contempt Elucidator Cimy. She knew this was it. When others had blankly repeated the Synod's nonsense about how Yond had saved them before and would save them again, she had nodded. But if a lifetime of studying the Frontier had taught her anything, it was that, if Yond had indeed created Rotifera - if She existed at all - She did not much care for the welfare of its inhabitants. While others had panicked, rioted, or calmly swallowed

the Synod's lies, Cimyck had said her farewells to the few of her species she didn't despise, organised her notes for the slim possibility of survivors, and settled down to reflect. And that was when the summons had arrived.

A movement caught Cimyck's eye: the Facilitator had shifted, as if receiving a message. A holding call. Keep our guest entertained a while longer.

'Do not trouble yourself,' sparkled Cimyck. 'I brought a diversion.' Cimyck produced a databank from her sac and started pretending to read. The Facilitator looked relieved.

Cimyck still hadn't the faintest idea why she, an undistinguished palaeosemiologist, had been summoned to the capitol of all Rotifera. She had been careful never to broadcast her heretical views, of course; but it was an open secret that many Elucidators were privately agnostic. Though a sanctioned profession, it was not a popular one. The disappearance rate among Elucidators was more than twice that in any other class.

There had been no clues in the message itself. 'Attend Tabernacle immediately,' it had said, and her Oppressor escort for the journey had been no more enlightening. It would have made more sense if she had been a nanobiologist; then again, there weren't any nanobiologists, since the life sciences were among the many proscribed disciplines ('There is life because Yond wishes it. That is knowledge enough'). Cimyck bet they were regretting that proscription now.

The Facilitator twinkled abruptly and straightened herself, motioning for Cimyck to do the same. The door slid back, and Virtually Unapproachable Archpresbytrix Rogb swept into the room.

The Archpresbytrix was smaller than Cimyck had expected. Even with the aid of her impressive canonicals, she was barely two thirds the Elucidator's size. And yet she radiated power unlike any Rotiferan Cimyck had met before.

'Glory to Yond, your Worship.' At the last second, Cimyck remembered to bow.

'Glory, Barely,' flashed Rogb, ignoring the Facilitator. 'Follow me.' As imperiously as she had entered, Rogb glided out.

Cimyck dashed after her and found herself in a narrow passageway spiralling downwards. For a small Rotiferan, the Archpresbytrix moved surprisingly quickly.

'You wish, of course, to know why you have been summoned.'

Cimyck figured they were already beyond pleasantries. 'You're either going to execute me or ask for my help.'

'Come, Cimyky,' shimmered Rogb. 'If we were going to disperse you, we would hardly do so in the privacy of the Sacramentum.'

She had a point. The Synod liked to remove its enemies very noisily and very messily, to discourage further subversion. Still, Cimyky wasn't comforted.

'Besides, your record is stainless. You have never... publicly challenged the orthodoxy.' Cimyky tensed at the implication, but Rogb changed the subject. 'You will be aware that Yond has seen fit to test us.

Test. An interesting way to describe the plague that had turned almost half of all Rotiferans into goo. Despite herself, Cimyky bowed and delivered the appropriate mantra. 'She is wise in all things.'

As they reached the interface at the end of the passageway, Cimyky realised that they hadn't passed a single soul since leaving the antechamber. Rogb swivelled to face her. 'Indeed. But Her wisdom at this time is... as yet inscrutable. And that is where you come in.'

'Your Worship?'

Rogb waved her corona over the access matrix to the heart of the Tabernacle. 'You realise that any attempt to pass on what you see today to another Rotiferan will result in summary dispersal.'

No surprise there. Most things in Rotifera resulted in summary dispersal.

The interface dissolved and the Archpresbytrix went through. If Cimyky's faith had died kilocycles ago, her reverence for the church had predeceased it by some margin. But she still felt a shiver as she entered the Sacramentum for the first time.

It was a cool, cavernous chamber, vertically ellipsoidal, empty but for a few ceremonial insignia. And for the gigantic, gleaming white column that stretched almost from floor to ceiling. Mounted atop the cylinder, just visible from where they stood, was a massive revolving turret - albeit one that looked as if it had stopped revolving several million cycles ago.

Ah. Perhaps Yond did exist after all.

2

So this was what the end of the world felt like.

Heaviness. No sound but the rushing of blood. Darkness, creeping in from the corners of the sky and out from within her, pulsing, blotting out her senses, leaving her, at the last, with one all-consuming feeling: hatred for that bitch Charisma Chen.

They'd been lined up for roll-call after the dropship had landed. They were a little more shambolic than usual, but no worse than you'd expect from a bunch of 13-year-old cadets on their first interplanetary school trip. As the Commander jaw-jawed with the tour guide at the end of the landing dais, Corporal Ny lind had called them to attention and begun his inspection.

When the Corporal reached Benny, he raised an eyebrow. 'I'm flattered, Summerfield, but this information won't be much use to me if your biosuit packs up.'

The cadets opposite stifled a giggle. Benny strained to see the readout on her chest. Whereas seconds before it had read, as it should:

VIT 100 - TEM 37.4 - ATM 100

It now said:

I LOVE - YOU CPL - NYLIND

Charisma Chen, class genius, runaway leader in the Most Sickeningly Emulated stakes and all-round smug cow, had had it in for her ever since Benny had had the temerity to beat her in a biometrics test. Benny had savoured the experience at the time - but Dios, had she been paying for it since.

Benny had once read that centuries ago, before the war, teenage hierarchies had largely been based on strength. Odd as it seemed now, for much of the second millennium, the kid most likely to make your life hell had been the drooling baboon with toxic breath and arms like haw sers. In these days of drawback-free painkillers, infallible robosurgeons and instant prosthetics, of course, physical intimidation didn't get you so far. To do someone serious damage in the 26th century, what you needed was technological prowess. When someone like Charisma Chen said she'd frag you up, what she meant was, she'd frag up your duty roster, your inbox, your grades. Or, in this case, your teenage infatuation. Benny longed for simpler times.

The stupid thing was, she didn't even like Corporal Ny lind. She despised him, with his effortless wit, his naturally fair hair and his absurdly broad shoulders. He had 'cadet crush' written in Day-Glo on every charming sinew. She hated him so much she wanted to press her foot down on his windpipe until his face went blue and his eyes bulged out of their sockets.

All right, maybe she liked him a bit.

And now she'd never be able to look him in the face again. Yup: at the tender age of 13, Benny's universe was collapsing in on itself.

Benny looked over her shoulder to check that no one had followed

her and ducked into a hollow in the twisted rock. It seemed as good a place as any to execute her plan. Well hidden, spacious, with good internal lighting, courtesy of another of the planet's famous lava lakes.

This one, she noticed as she emptied her gear onto a flattened outcrop, didn't have any of the crappy stalagmites they'd been dragged halfway across the galaxy to see. They weren't stalagmites, of course; no one knew what they were. Oh, the tour guide insisted they were geological formations; but then, the tour guide was a frustrated geologist. Not that Benny had any better theories. On a planet with no signs of life, past or present, no weather to speak of and no nearby planetoid belt, the only explanation yet proposed for Jabbour's Vermicelli, as they were called, was geology. The thing was, Benny had thought as the guide had rote out his spiel, apart from the slow decline in lava levels as the planet's core cooled, there was no geological activity either. The crappy stalagmites were a bona-fide mystery.

Now that Benny was detached enough to be honest about it, they weren't particularly crappy, either. The individual branches were only fifty centimetres or so thick, rising maybe five metres into the air - but the way they wound and intertwined across the surface of the lakes, their brilliant colours - pinks, blues, yellows - collectively forming a spectacular latticework that stretched for miles... The closest thing Benny had seen were those wiring diagrams from ancient bombmaking textbooks, and they weren't very close.

Even so. She didn't see why they couldn't have admired them from the comfort of a holosuite, instead of getting kitted out in full riot gear, taking a dropship across three star systems and spending a full day on a planet where the only thing to do apart from gawp at the stalagmites was buy poor organic-ceramic replicas of the stalagmites. All their other school trips had been virtual; why had they had to 'go live' this time? Probably, Benny guessed, because the academy could actually afford the insurance premiums. Apart from the highly pressurised atmosphere - a walk in the park for their combat-grade biosuits - the danger factor on Jabbour's World was zero.

At least, it had been, until Charisma Chen had made the mistake of pissing Benny off.

Benny held up the instrument of her revenge and turned it in the lava-light. Chen's CosmiKosmetics Null facial organiser. Personal vanity products were officially banned at the academy, but most of the

girls dabbled in the privacy of the barracks. Not Benny, of course - she didn't sign up to that teenage bullshit. Still, she conceded, the NuU was a step up from pre-war times, when people used to spend hours rubbing crushed insects and animal fats into their faces. The NuU's microlasers took less than a second to sculpt the look you wanted. Or, in most cases at this academy, the look Charisma Chen wanted.

Benny turned the compact over and readied her disruptor. She'd like to see Chen try to laugh with the face of a Venarian cloudfish.

She had barely pried off the maintenance plate when she heard the voice. 'Personally, if I'm bypassing security protocols, I find it easier to use a sample of the subject's voice.'

Of course! Why hadn't she... bollocks.

Chen was two feet away, smiling her dead smile and holding out her hand. Dammit, how old were the biosensors on this suit?

Benny pulled the compact to her chest. 'Well, you know what they say. One cheap trick deserves another.'

'Nice try, Summerfield, but you're playing with the big girls now.' Chen wagged her gloved fingers.

Benny decided to save her ingenious comeback. Right now, the best idea seemed to be to slam her free fist into Chen's helmet.

Ahh. Simpler times.

Chen's biosuit soaked up most of the blow, but little of the shock. It was a full three seconds before she threw herself at Benny, sending both girls tumbling to the cave floor.

As they struggled, a deafening metallic growl came from the entrance. Chen turned immediately towards the noise; Benny ignored it, taking the opportunity to gain leverage on her rival and heaved her off, sending her sprawling into the outcrop.

A louder growl. Benny looked up this time, and immediately wished she had done so earlier. A squat, green, vaguely humanoid hulk was standing in the cave entrance, pointing a large weapon straight at her. She dropped the compact and started to raise her hands.

Too late.

The short white burst was followed by a long grey fuzz.

3

Cimykh rubbed her eyespots and looked again. The column was still there.

She couldn't recall many chapters of the Vyvyod verbatim - that was the Regurgitators' job - but the story of the war against Cnidaria

had been one of her favourites at the seminary, and now the words welled up inside her of their own accord.

The Children of Rotifera were afraid, and called to Yond, but Yond was still angry with them. And so the hordes of Cnidaria came, and slaughtered many of the Children, and desecrated their bodies... And the Children were few, and they wept. And Yond took pity on them, and sent down Her Sword so that the infidel might be driven from the land. And when the Cnidarians came again, the Sword spat circles of death upon them, and the Rotiferans vanquished them and built a temple to the Glory of Yond.'

'Can it be? The... the Sword of Yond?'

'But of course. You assumed the Vyvyod was lying?'

'Of course not! I just thought the Sword was...'

Rogb let out a glint of contempt. 'A metaphor? You Elucidators are all the same. Nothing exists unless you can lay your filthy coronas on it.'

Cimyky still could not take her eyespots off the artefact. 'But if it is real... if it has been here all this time... why have you allowed Rotiferans to continue to live in doubt?'

The Archpresbytrix took on a warmer glow. 'Because without doubt, there is no faith.'

Of course, thought Cimyky. If Rotiferans had a direct link to Yond, there would be no need for the Synod to provide one. Failure to prove the existence of Yond was not, as she had lazily thought, the Synod's greatest handicap. It was the very key to their power.

Cimyky incandesced. 'Rotiferans have a right to know that the Sword exists. They have a right to see it!'

'Rotiferans have a right to nothing,' said Rogb dismissively. 'Or are you forgetting the Tenets? The Five Tenets are the only reason Rotifera has lasted so many billions of cycles.'

Nearly right, thought Cimyky. The Five Tenets were the only reason the Synod had lasted so many billions of cycles. Although she strongly doubted whether they would see it through many more.

Cimyky tried another line of attack. 'Or perhaps you kept it a secret because you were afraid. You were afraid that if you gave the Elucidators access to it, our studies would reveal something that contradicted your precious scriptures.'

'Nothing your science has discovered has ever brought into question the authority of the Vyvyod.'

'What, then, of Fairly Important Elucidator Farb's conclusive demonstration that the universe does not end at the Frontier?' Cimyky

phosphoresced as she remembered her mentor. 'In direct contradiction of the Vyvyod.'

Rogb did not rise to the bait. 'A discovery that cost her her life and those of many of her colleagues. If the universe does indeed continue beyond the Frontier, but cannot support life, what purpose does such knowledge serve? Is the Frontier then not, to all intents and purposes, the edge of the universe?'

'So you're saying that the Vyvyod's mention of the 'edge of the universe' is... a metaphor?'

Cimyck was encouraged by Rogb's silence. 'Besides, you are as familiar as I with Farb's thesis. That in the distant past, by means unknown, Rotiferans developed a means of... going beyond.'

'A thesis for which she presented precisely no evidence.'

'She had evidence, as well you know.' Cimyck struggled to prevent herself turning purple. 'The Laj Stones. The language was ancient, far removed from anything recorded before. And yet Farb had made some progress in deciphering them. They spoke of an age when the world was a thousand times larger; of Rotiferans mixing peacefully with Cnidarians; of...' Cimyck paused, wondering how much of this Rogb already knew. Damn it. She was beyond caring. 'And of gigantic constructions that enabled Rotiferans to cross the Frontier. Of tunnels to Heaven.'

Cimyck let her words sink in. 'And then, one day, the Stones - and all of Farb's research - were gone.'

Rogb was impassive. 'Such is the way of things. The stones were of no economic or technological value. Must I remind you of the function of an Elucidator: to procure artefacts and knowledge that are of material use to Rotifera, and no more?'

'No technological value?! The information in those stones could have -'

'The sacrilegious fictions on those stones could have brought an end to civilisation,' finished Rogb. 'And now, as civilisation faces another threat, your work on those stones brings you here.' She gestured towards the towering edifice.

All of Cimyck's hatred for the Synod was suddenly swallowed up in a surge of excitement. They wanted her to study the Sword. If only Farb could see her now.

'The Synod is confident that Yond will deliver Rotifera from this Sickness. It is Her covenant to us in the Vyvyod: if we ask for Her help, She will give it. But some members raised the possibility that... we have not been asking in the proper way.'

Cimyk's mastax burned orange. 'You admit, then, that forcing every Rotiferan to sacrifice 10,000 of her children might not have had the required effect?'

! Rogb pulsed ominously. 'Some members argue that the sacrifices not go far enough. They believe Rotifera must be further purified Yond will deign to intervene.'

It hadn't occurred to Cimyk before that the Synod might be home to varying degrees of evil. But she was beginning to get the impression that she was dealing with one of the lesser ones. 'And yet here I am.'

! 'Indeed.' Another discomfiting twinkle from Rogb. 'The idea of an Elucidator was not a popular one, but I was able to achieve consensus.'

! Cimyk decided not to ask how. 'What exactly are you hoping I will ?'

'A message; a sign. Anything we might have missed.'

That did it. The combination of pride and curiosity overpowered Cimyk's ethical objections. 'What about equipment?'

'You shall have everything you require,' flashed the Archpresbytrix. 'Except, of course, for assistance. No living soul beyond the Synod must know that you are here.'

Typical, thought Cimyk. The crowning glory of my palaeosemiological career, and I can't even tell it to a male.

4

'So how are you going to try to talk yourself out of this one, Summerfield?' Commander Lebidowicz steepled his fingers and leaned back in his chair.

The shop owner's private office, which the commander had requisitioned for the purposes of this impromptu hearing, was a spartan affair, with a comlink, an antediluvian multimedia suite and a solitary desk and chair. The proprietor clearly didn't get many visitors.

There were five of them in the room: the Commander, Ny lind standing behind him, Benny and Chen facing them and, lurking menacingly to one side, the Transglobal Education Management Systems Compliance Officer who had just taken her down with a concussion rifle. Darned Martians; no concept of minimum necessary force.

Benny had in fact come up with quite a few mitigating fictions

between waking up in the ship's medbay and being hauled into the cafeteria, but had ultimately decided to take this one on the chin. 'I'm sorry, Commander.'

Lebidowicz leaned forward. 'You are familiar with the story of the Amstell High expedition?'

Of course she bloody was. They'd only had it drummed into them twenty times during the briefing. Although she failed to see the relevance to her case of a bunch of civilian schoolkids who landed on an asteroid at the precise moment that a bored IMC executive picked it up with his cargo ship's tractor beam for a game of celestial conkers.

'And the Gazh Khazhani incident?'

Okay, that one was more relevant. But Benny wasn't dumb enough to run off and sample the local flora, only to discover abruptly on the spacehop home that what she had ingested was a fruit of the boom-boom tree, a species colourfully named after its method of propagation.

'I'm not stupid. I can look after myself.'

'A fact to which Chen here will readily testify.'

'We were just messing about. He didn't have to shoot me.' Benny glared over her shoulder at the Martian, who was still brandishing his weapon as if hoping she would bolt again at any moment.

'The TEMS officer was just protecting his clients,' said Lebidowicz.

Protecting the company's money, you mean, thought Benny. Even though she'd never known any different, she still found it odd that her platoon commander deferred to an insurance grunt.

The Commander stood up. 'Well, Chen, I'm satisfied you've learned your lesson. Suit up and rejoin the party.'

Chen didn't even try to suppress her glee as she shoved her way past Benny towards the kit room.

Lebidowicz waited for her to leave, then turned to Benny and sighed. 'As for you, Summerfield... You know, until recently, we had been considering making you section leader of Foxtrot India Zulu. But your disciplinary record over the past few weeks - well, it makes my ears hurt. And now this. I'm afraid I have no choice but to send you back to the dropship to wait with the pilot. I believe he has some maintenance jobs you can help with.'

'But, Commander -'

Lebidowicz assumed it was his savage glare that cut Benny short. In fact, it was Corporal Nyland putting finger to lips behind him.

Cimyk put down her tachyon emitter and turned her eyespots to the walls. She'd been staring at this thing for far too long.

It hadn't taken her long to figure out how the 'weapon' had worked: the conduit running between column and turret had ruptured, probably when the structure hit the ground, releasing a high-pressure blast of vaporised ethers that would have annihilated every life form over a radius of five clicks. The Cnidarians - and any Rotiferans who happened to be in the way - hadn't stood a chance. The ethers were long gone, of course, but residual droplets had combined with high-energy particulates to form tell-tale ridges beneath the turret.

Unfortunately, none of this told her much about the origin of the structure, beyond the fact that it didn't sit anywhere on the Rotiferan timeline. Volatile organic compounds such as these had been synthesised in the laboratory inside powerful magnetic fields - but on this scale? Still, she was pleased that she'd already figured out as much as the Synod knew, and they'd had megacycles to examine it.

And that was why Cimyk had now switched her attention to the body of the structure. She reasoned that, if the Sword had any secrets left to divulge, they were going to be somewhere no one else had thought of looking. So she had pitched her latest site about a third of the way down the homogeneous white cylinder, on the side opposite the Sacrarium entrance. She wasn't sure why she'd picked this particular spot; gut feeling, Farb would have called it. And she'd have shimmered and told him to shut up.

The material from which the body was constructed had, it seemed, been pulverised, refined, then radiation-treated to improve its durability. It was a complex ceramic composite, of uniform thickness all the way down, designed to withstand massive physical trauma, yet curiously susceptible to Cimyk's tachyon saw. However, she had taken enough samples by now to guess that the 'skin' of the structure had told her all it was going to tell.

Cimyk sighed and wiped her vitellarium. Time for a break. A couple of chlorellas might get the juices going again, and then - wait. Over there. The area just beyond the site markers was similar to that inside, but the surface was irregular, as if... as if something had been broken off. No. Eroded.

Cimyk picked up her saw and hurried to the new spot with renewed vigour. From her new vantage point, she saw that the irregularity

wasn't a one-off. There was another, to the right. And another, below. No doubt about it: a less durable material, long since stripped away, had once been superimposed on the skin. In what was looking increasingly like a pattern.

A message from Yond.

6

Benny finished working just as the pilot climbed back on board.

'Good job you spotted those loose insulation plates,' said the chubby Earth Reptile with a hint of embarrassment, 'or we'da been in for a real rough ride during re-entry.'

Good. He hadn't twigged that the plates in question were at exactly shoulder-height for a 13-year-old girl.

As the pilot shuffled down the gantry towards her, she noticed the sonic wrench protruding from her kitbag. She kicked it under the nearest seat.

'Nice work on the stern portholes too, soldier. Ain't seen squat out of those since I don't know when.'

The pilot rubbed her arm with what she sincerely hoped was avuncular affection, and turned back towards the cockpit.

The screech-clunk of the airlock and a bark from Nylind signalled the return of the troop. Benny took her seat and finally let herself relax. Not bad for an on-the-fly plan B. Get sent back to the dropship; take the pilot out of the picture for twenty minutes; find Chen's seat (middle seat, back row, as usual); then loosen the restraining bolts just enough that they would break free on landing, sending Chen crashing into the ceiling. She left the harness intact - she didn't want to kill the girl, just give her the mother of all headaches.

Ha, she thought as the chattering cadets filed past. Chen might be queen of IT, but when it came to mechanics, the undisputed champ was

'Summerfield!'

Benny's head jerked up. Chen. Again. Shit! Okay, so the girl was bright, but surely her talents didn't extend to telepathy?

'What have you done with my scent stick, bitch?'

'What?'

'The one clipped to my NuU. Where is it?'

Phew.

Benny shrugged.

Deeply Intimidating Archpresbytrix Gyr casually grabbed and ingested a passing nanochloropsis as she watched the Facilitators filter away the last particles of Archpresbytrix Rogb and Elucidator Cimykh.

She had been proved right many times before - sometimes, admittedly, after a judicious adjustment of the facts - but this occasion had a particular sweetness. The very idea that science could forge a link with Yond! It was an affront to Her name. Now that Rogb had paid the ultimate price for her folly, the path was clear for Gyr to steer the Synod back to the only sensible course of action. The only possible course of action, according to a proper reading of the Vyvyod. And when enough sacrifices had been made, Yond would reach down Her hand to save the purest ones, and they would embark on a shining new era in Rotiferan history. And - Gyr allowed herself a guilty sparkle at the thought - if the Grand Begum's symptoms did turn out to be incipient Sickness, it was not beyond imagining that Gyr would be the one to lead them into it.

As she floated up towards the exit, Gyr's eyespot caught on something. Cimykh's diagram; the cornerstone of their presentation. Hm. Best dispose of such witchcraft before a Facilitator found it and started getting ideas.

Before placing it in the disperser, she examined the diagram once more. A language, they had said; like nothing ever seen before, but a language nonetheless. Gyr didn't know whether to shimmer or pulse. A series of simple geometric shapes, conveying something so complex as meaning? The shapes were static, for Yond's sake. What's more - Cimykh had been adamant on this point - when originally created, they didn't even change colour!

As Gyr watched the shapes fade into nothingness, she noted, with some reluctance, that they did have a primitive sort of beauty:

CHANEL
NO 135

Benny and Louise

Cavan Scott & Mark Wright

Librarian's note: There are several 'Bernice Summerfield' legends in the archive from the Lacuna Period, but so much was destroyed in the wars it is difficult to corroborate details. Versions of the following extract are still told on Slarvia to this day - usually to punish children.

|| eep space.

Well, not that deep...

But deep enough.

An inky black carapace encrusted with the diamonds of long-dead stars. One of these diamonds flashed brighter than its fellows, burning with an intensity that grew, flaring until it formed into the sleek, snubbed lines of a small planet-hopping shuttlecraft. Its engines shrieked in protest as they blasted the craft onwards, obvious to the layman, or anybody who might dabble in interstellar engine mechanics of a weekend, that they were working well beyond their meagre capabilities.

Somebody had their foot on the gas.

The stars in the wake of the craft began to fire brighter. One. Two. Five. Eleven. Twenty. The heavens began to swarm with ships, heavy, ugly-looking battle cruisers. Their numbers grew by the second, dropping out of hyperspace until at least a hundred of the craft thundered on in a ragged formation. If you looked closely at the

ships, they seemed to emanate a greenish hue and looked to be coated in a sickly, sweaty sheen of oozing slime.

The tiny shuttlecraft whined onwards.

The battle cruisers rumbled after it.

The two young women stared wide-eyed at the viewscreen at the front of the cockpit. What could only be described as a giant green snail stared back.

'This is the Death-Cruiser...' The creature made a series of sucking, heaving noises that sounded like somebody gargling rancid, jellied-meat but left the two girls none the wiser. '...of the Imperial Slarvian Battle Fleet. Once again, you are ordered to power down your engines and prepare to be boarded...'

Bernice Summerfield slammed her hand down on the control to silence the audio link, but it remained on the screen, its red gash of a mouth gurgling up and down in unheard threats.

'Bollocks, bollocks, bollocks, bollocks, bollocks, bollocks, bollocks, bollocks...'

Benny turned to the hysterically gibbering girl next to her, and screamed as gently as she could, 'Louise! Shut! Up!'

Louise snapped her head round, long blonde hair whipping round with her. She stared at Benny as if she'd just slapped her, a hand moving up to her cheek. 'What?' she asked.

'Just shut up, all right? We've got 127 Slarvian battle cruisers on our arse, every missile, cannon and phaser locked on to our pitifully tiny shuttlepod, and you sitting there whining isn't helping.' Benny stabbed a control and the pod lurched forward, the engines somehow finding an extra micron of energy to slam through the fuel injectors.

Louise opened her mouth to speak but thought better of it. Then thought again. 'But what are we going to do!?'

'What are *we* going to do?' Benny spluttered incredulously. '*We*? I think you mean: what are *you* going to do?'

'It's not my fault this happened,' Lou countered, not quite convincingly.

'Actually,' hissed Benny icily, 'on this particular occasion, it is quite categorically, without a shadow of a doubt, your bloody fault!'

'We'll be all right. I mean, they can't fire on us. They can't risk damaging...'

An explosion blossomed at the edge of the window and the shuttlepod lurched

'Tell that to the guy with the deely-boppers,' Benny shouted as she

tried to wrest the fragile (but really quite nippy with a good solar wind behind you) craft from going into a spin.

Louise jumped in her seat as an alarm bleeped for attention on the dashboard. 'Now what?'

'Erm...' Benny glanced across the controls. 'Erm... Oh. It's the heat shields.'

'What about them?'

'I believe we're about to lose them.'

'How?' shrieked Lou.

Benny didn't answer but grabbed the joystick and wrenched it hard to the left, pulling the shuttlepod into a sickening, lurching turn. The stars blurred in the windows and every nut and badly tightened bolt on the craft shrieked in protest.

And then Benny hit the brake. The ship stopped dead. and there it was, dead centre of the cockpit window.

'Bollocks, bollocks, bollocks, bollocks...'

Benny and Louise gawped at the burning orange star. The star burned back, vivid red prominences curling towards them through the inky void.

'We've strayed too close to a sun.' Benny tapped a key on the dashboard. 'Designated 277181-X. Oh.' She sat back in the pilot's seat, disappointment wrinkling her brow. 'That's a bit of a dull...'

'Who cares! It's not likely to get us before the Slarvians do, is it?'

Benny's head shot up and she looked directly at the orange ball. Then she looked at Louise, her mouth curling into a half-smile, eyes reflecting the orange of the sun. 'I've got an idea...'

Aboard the Slarvian mothership, the Supreme Commander squirmed in its command cot as he stared at the shuttlepod on the main viewscreen, the burning sun hanging before it like a tasteless medallion. His antennae waved around wildly as he raised himself to the communicator.

'Supreme Commander to all ships,' he rasped in guttural Slarvian. 'Open fire. All weapons!'

The plastic Hula Girl on the dashboard of the shuttlepod bobbed around on her little plastic spring, happily playing her plastic ukulele. haloed by the broiling orange of the sun.

Benny turned to face Louise who turned to face her.

On the screen, the Supreme Commander screamed orders.

Swallowing, Louise nodded. Benny reached down to the controls as

she held out her hand to her travelling companion. The other woman took it, squeezing tightly.

Not taking her eyes from the star above, Benny punched the large red button.

Under the gaze of the Slarvian Imperial Battle Fleet, the engines of the little craft fired, plunging Bernice Summerfield, her friend Louise and their trusty shuttlepod into the heart of the sun designated 277181 -X. They say that in space, nobody can hear you scream. If you could actually hear anything in space, all you'd have picked up at this point was a small, indiscreet 'plop' to mark their passing.

It was raining. But then, it always rained on Slarvia, so being surprised about that was a tragic waste of energy.

Bernice Summerfield stared out across the street through the sheet of driving, stagnant water that hammered down from the perpetually murky sky, stirring the sludge in her mug that masqueraded as coffee. It was so thick that her wrist was actually aching, but that took her mind off the fact that she was drinking out of a mug in the shape of a large cartoon snail - not to mention the searing laser blasts of alcohol-induced pain pounding through her head. Not a bad trade, she thought miserably.

And then she thought about Him. Damn, breaking the rules again! Any thought about Him was a lot worse than the hangover pain, so Benny tried to steer her synapses back to the job in hand. Although the tasty thought of introducing His bollocks to an ion bonder gave her a small floating bubble of comfort in this gin and tonic of misery. Hmm, very, very...

No! Benny slammed the mug down on the table, jolting her back from forbidden territory, wincing as the supernova flared up again behind her retinas. She was almost grateful.

Benny swore under her breath. How had she come to this? Two years ago she'd jumped the troopship bound for Capella, sonic-trowel in one hand and a bucketful of dreams in the other. Two years later and the trowel was as tarnished as her dreams. The great Bernice Summerfield, destined to be a respected scholar and all-round good egg - the kind of person who has TV movies made about her life - was sitting in a coffee-shop in Skeleesh, the prime city of Slarvia, drinking sludgy coffee from a giant comedy snail, nursing a hangover from beyond the grave and a heart that wasn't just broken, it was positively pulverised. How was this possible?

The first part of the tangled equation was easily explained. The sore head had a lot to do with the barrage of triple Molgarian hypershots she'd been pouring down her neck the night before. It was all a bit hazy, really. She remembered something about trying to impress the tasty Federation pilot in the mega-tight uniform with a display of tabletop dancing that, rather than turning her into an utterly ravishing sex goddess, probably gave her the appearance of an undernourished octopus having an epileptic fit. The last thing she remembered was jumping off the table, quite elegantly considering, but ruining the effect by throwing up on a dwarf before collapsing. Yup, hangover one hundred per cent accounted for.

So, on to the second part. Why was she in a Java-on-Slarvia™ coffee shop on the rain-swept hellhole of the Slarvian throneworld? Well, it had seemed like a good idea at the time as Louise had plunged a pin randomly into the fold-out map at the centre of the *Rough Guide to the Universe for the Broken-Hearted and Borderline Alcoholic*. They had been on the space-lanes for three weeks by this point, doing the same thing - pin, planet, drink... pin, planet, drink... And it had been a great success... until now.

But of course, there was the third part of the puzzle, when things with Him had gone tits up. Him. Gareth. He was great, sexy, funny. It was nothing serious, nothing special, but they had fun, in *and* out of the bedroom. But the problem was that he'd been having fun in more than just *her* bedroom. Benny looked upon herself as a pretty easy going, no strings, let's have a laugh kind of girl, but was in no way prepared for the heartbreak of coming home to find Gareth in bed with another bloke.

Of course, Benny had dumped him on the spot, thrown his gear out onto the street (although she'd been tempted to keep the jockstrap he wore for playing hyperball), and dived head first into the nearest bottle of alcohol. The thing that really burned was that she hadn't been in love with the creep until the moment she'd found him in that post-coital clinch...

Benny gulped down a glob of viscous coffee; picked up her personal com unit and thumbed a fast connect hotkey. The display flashed the name 'Lou' as Benny put the device to her ear. After several seconds Benny sighed.

'Louise, it's me. Remember? Bernice. Where the hell are you? We need to get off this rock. I want to head to the museum, see the Pearl, and then find the nearest planet with a decent sonic shower. I stink. And so do you for abandoning me last night. I hope he was worth it.'

Benny stabbed the connection closed and threw it down next to the mug, googly snail eyes staring back at her.

And then of course, there was Louise, completing the complicated sequence of events. A couple of days after Gareth's sordid little betrayal, her personal com had buzzed and a crazy lady had delivered a torrent of abuse down the line, the like of which Benny would be hard pushed to match herself. This was her first encounter with Louise, aka Lou.

Once she'd calmed the loony lady down, Benny was able to get to the nub of the problem, and why Louise was quite happy calling a complete stranger a daughter of a Huldran Mecha-Whore. Louise had discovered that her boyfriend had been screwing somebody else and had just dumped her to move in with the screwy, who Louise had mistakenly been told was one Bernice Summerfield.

Oh, how they'd laughed when the wires of betrayal had been uncrossed and figured out their respective other halves had been boffing the arse off each other.

Hysterical.

And from this point on, a firm friendship was born, forged in the hellish fury of two scorned women and one hell of a bender on the night Benny and Louise met up for the first time to drown shared sorrows.

Benny should have hated Lou, having mammaries and butt cheeks that women have killed for, not to mention dazzling blonde hair, shiny white teeth and a father with a bottomless bank account. But there's something about betrayal that can make all women equal, so...

... they became drinking buddies, members of a secret society of man-haters whose only membership criteria were a broken heart and a gargantuan affinity for alcohol. It was on one of their infamous binges that Louise had come up with a plan.

'Let's quit our jobs,' she had slurred, 'and go blasting through the stars. Shout at the universe a bit.'

It wasn't the most original or earth-shattering idea but somehow, two days later, the unlikely duo were blasting out of the local spaceport. Louise had dropped a hat and daddy's aforementioned bank account had furnished them with a Starseeker Shuttlepod fitted with all mod-cons including a couple of bunks, mini-bar and automatic chocolate fondue maker. Benny had bought herself a map of the system and a change of clothes, and they were off. Two free spirits exploring the cosmos.

So far their interplanetary trip had taken them halfway around the sector and back again, as well as swallowing most of their hard-earned credit. Of course, Louise was stubbornly refusing to call her dad and ask for a sub as she was determined she would do this under her own steam for once. Benny was all for that whole sisters doing it for themselves thing, but personal credit ratings were getting barer by the second. She was pretty sure that at some point in some semblance of sobriety during the previous night's shenanigans the two of them had agreed they'd reached the end of the road and it was time to head back to reality.

Benny welcomed reality. Being a free spirit was fun, but Benny had surprised herself with some of the hidden depths she'd discovered in herself that couldn't be quenched with night after night of liver abuse.

Benny slurped the last gobbet of coffee from her mug and considered buying another, when she remembered that she'd probably have to sell a few organs to stump up the cash. As Slarvia's long-dead, twin planet hung heavily in the sky above her, she vowed that when Louise finally showed up she'd be the one to say enough is enough, we're going home.

She picked up her personal corn unit and, as she was about to stab the hot key to connect to Lou, the unit started to vibrate and trilled the first (and only) single by last year's *Universal Idol* winner. The screen flared and displayed a picture of Louise downing a yard of Barastabon cognac. Benny shot an embarrassed glance around the coffee bar, made a mental note to change the ringtone, and answered the call.

'Where the cruk are you, Louise?' she hissed.

'Hi,' breathed Lou in that annoying sing-song voice she had when she knew she was in trouble. 'I'm in that bar around the corner from the Imperial Museum. You know, Shellfire? I could ask where the cruk you are. We arranged to meet here for breakfast.'

Bernice frowned. 'Oh. Did we?'

'Erm, *yeah*. Just before you challenged that Galyari to an arm wrestle.'

Benny furrowed her forehead in concentration, then unfurrowed it when she realised that it was extremely painful. 'Hang on, *what* Galyari? There was no bloody Galyari, was there?'

'Wee-eell' Lou demurred.

'And we didn't arrange to meet, did we?'

Lou snorted down the connection. 'Ha! Well, it was worth a try.'

'One of these days... Anyway, what are you doing there?'

There was a pause at the other end of the line.

'Lou?'

'Well,' Louise started, and Benny thought she sounded so sheepish she was practically baaing. 'Just after you punched that transvestite with the beard, I...'

'Just before I did what?' Benny groaned. 'Actually, forget it, just get to the point.'

'You know how it is... We got talking, one thing led to another, and I ended up back at his place.'

'At least one of us got lucky. All I got was a hangover.'

'He was really nice,' Louise carried on, letting her last words trail off into an inaudible mumble, 'works at the, ah... Imperial Museum...'

Benny perked up at this. 'Wow! That's a really cool job. You know I want to visit...' Benny stopped and stared down at her snail mug.

The snail mug stared back.

'Lou? All the staff at the Slarvian Imperial Museum, are, urn... How do I put this... Slarvians?'

'Yes.' Lou replied meekly.

'And, correct me if I'm wrong, but your average Slarvian is in fact a six-foot-tall snail.'

There was silence at the other end of the connection.

'Ew!' Benny jumped to her feet in a combination of disgust and delight. 'Rank! Even by my standards of inter-species coupling, that's right off the scale. You've pulled some munters in the short time I've known you, but Goddess! A mollusc?! That goes so far beyond gross, they'll have to make up a new word for it.'

Louise sniffed haughtily. 'Finished?'

'Finished? I haven't even started yet!' Benny was enjoying this so much she nearly punched the air with glee.

'He was really charming, it was dark and those hypershots are very strong. And there's something really sexy about the way he gurgled.'

Benny didn't know whether to stifle a giggle or gag.

'Spare me the details. Just get over here.'

'Teeny, tiny problem there, Benny. My credit stick is out of credit. Any chance you can come to me?'

Benny's eyes rolled up to dark Slarvian sky. Benny to the rescue, again! Always bailing people out. Well, she was determined that would not be how her life panned out. This whole trip had been about being a rebel, screaming at the universe.

But then, Lou would be stranded if she didn't go. And what passed

for the cultured side of her brain wanted to go the museum anyway and see the legendary Pearl of Wisdom. And if she was lucky, Lou's new boyfriend might be able to get them in for free...

'All right. Stay put, I'm on my way. Try not to pick up any more slime-encrusted men.'

'Funny.'

Clicking the communicator shut, Benny pushed herself up and dropped a few coins onto the table. She would have called for the waiter, but she was in a hurry. That was the problem with a planet populated by giant snails. Nobody had ever heard of fast food.

The hover bus lurched to a halt and Benny tumbled out onto the pavement. She didn't even have time to shoot the driver a killer look before it had sped off.

Slarvia just hadn't got the hang of the tourist thing. It wasn't that it hadn't tried. Centuries ago, the twin planets of Slarvia and Slarvos had been at the heart of an, if not quite terrifying, then at least fairly impressive empire. At one point in history, the Slarvians, while hardly respected, had had quite a reputation for cruelty and torture. There had been a period of expansion as the Imperial Battle Fleet had advanced the Emperor's might out into space, with planets and systems toppling into submission. They'd even tried having a go at Earth...

And then it had all gone wrong when the Slarvians had tried to take on the long-defunct but revered Galactic Federation, which bitch-slapped the empire all the way back to the throneworlds and a nasty little civil war.

Internal Slarvian power-struggles had ripped the empire apart. As Benny tried to remember her ancient history, her eyes looked up to the scarred rock that dominated the Slarvian sky. Once, Slarvia's lush twin-planet of Slarvos had shared the seat of power, but had been reduced to ashes in a single day as the first civil war had kicked off. Benny couldn't remember what had sparked the conflict and to be honest, couldn't give two hoots. All she knew was that at the signing of the last treaty the current Emperor's father/mother had declared that Slarvia would now be a friend to the galaxy not an enemy. Instead of invading and pillaging, the Slarvians threw themselves into the tourist business, attempting to turn Slarvia into the new New Rome.

But one thing that the Slarvians failed to get was that, whether you were a race of war-mongering bastards or the universal answer to Blackpool, nobody, with the best of intentions, ever took a giant snail seriously.

Only mugs ended up on Slarvia, Benny thought miserably. Mugs like Benny and Louise... But still, there was the Pearl of Wisdom, and to a wannabe archaeological genius, that was almost worth being here for...

Benny rolled up her increasingly soggy collar and sloshed her way across the road to the bar with a sickly green neon sign burning the word Shellfire in air that was almost greasily thick with rain. Behind her, the majestic (well, as majestic as anything got on this planet) lines of the Slarvian Imperial Museum rose into the sky. Monstrous marble snails glared down from the twin towers that stood either side of the huge wooden doors, and Benny shuddered at the thought of anybody getting jiggy with one of those things. Ugh!

She stopped for a minute to let a Slarvian squirm past her and slipped through the purple door into the depths of Shellfire. One thing about Slarvia, nobody had told the government about licensing laws and you could get a drink any time. As the wave of fetid, stale alcohol rose up to meet her nostrils from the darkness below, Benny wondered if that was such a good idea.

First things first, thought Benny as she took the darkened stairs gingerly. She'd grab Lou, pop into the museum to see the Pearl, head for the spacepod, shower and blast warp back to the lives they'd left behind. Bastard exes or no bastard exes, Benny had reached her limit, both financially and emotionally.

Louise stood by the bar dominating the entire back wall of the murky room, and, Benny was pleased to note, looking as good as she felt. A bulky holdhall hung from her shoulder, and a coffee steamed next to her on the bar. She glanced nervously around the bar, flicking her eyes into the darkened corners which were taken up with huge booths, big enough to seat a group of carousing Slarvians. Her twitchiness was probably down to the lone Slarvian belting out a rousing karaoke chorus of *Sound of the Underground* that sounded more like somebody vomiting treacle. Behind the bar, another Slarvian with an apron stretched across its bulky torso was polishing a glass held in its tiny cybernetic arms.

As Benny stepped across the chamber, Louise spotted her and strode across the bar to meet her halfway.

'Hi, Lou,' smirked Benny. 'How's the new boyfriend? Bet he doesn't like butter and garl...'

Louise grabbed Benny's arm and steered her round 180 degrees and propelled her back towards the steps up the street. 'Come on, we're leaving,' she said, hefting the holdall, which looked very heavy.

'Hey, what's the rush,' complained Benny. 'I thought I might get a coffee. It's raining its arse off out there.'

'No time. Got to go,' blurted Louise, clattering up the steps in her party heels, practically dragging Benny with her. Benny pulled her arm back and came to a resolute stop, looking up at Lou.

'What's got into you? And I'm not talking about the snail. I've got to say, don't fancy yours much...' Benny was on the verge of collapsing into smirking laughter but stopped short when Louise turned back and stamped a spike-heeled foot onto the steps like a four year old.

'We haven't got time for this Benny,' she hissed. 'We have got to get out of here. Now!'

Benny opened her mouth to reply but Lou was already off and up the steps. Benny groaned, blew out an exasperated sigh and heaved herself after her bizarrely highly strung-out friend.

'Lou, wait up!' Benny shouted after the rapidly disappearing Lou who was trying to hail one of the bubble-podded cabs that trundled through the streets. Benny sloshed over to her. 'What's the rush?'

Lou seemed to have calmed slightly and affected a breezy air. 'Oh, you know,' she trilled. 'Bit tired, need a wash, bit of a snooze. Preferably not here. TAXI!' she screeched in Benny's ear. Across the road, a cab trundled round in a circle and coasted towards the girls.

Benny looked back towards the museum. 'But I wanted to go and see the Pearl of Wisdom. It's about the only thing worth coming to Slarvia for.'

Louise's flushed cheeks paled white for a second. 'Erm, I wouldn't bother. It's not that great. Apparently.'

'What? The great Pearl of Wisdom, once the source of all power on Slarvia? Any emperor who possessed it was said to have a guaranteed reign for more than a century? It's a bit of culture, a bit of history...'

'You can't. It's being cleaned. Bob said.' Lou flashed an apologetic smile.

Benny blinked. 'Bob? You shagged a snail called Bob?'

Lou arched an eyebrow and pursed her lips so thin they disappeared.

Benny got the message. 'That's... nice,' she laughed nervously.

The cab pulled up next to them, the Slarvian in his bubble pod at the front leering out at them, feelers gyrating hopefully at a possibly lucrative fare.

Benny looked back at the museum, the archaeologist in her straining at the leash. Reluctantly she pulled it back and turned her back on the museum. 'All right, you win.'

Lou flashed a relieved smile. 'That's my girl!'

The Slarvian looked from one human to the other, gargling questioningly. An embarrassed silence passed between the friends. Benny sagged, giving in once more and fished into a pocket for her severely depleted credit stick.

'This is the last time,' she grumbled at Lou and slotted the stick into the universal reader bolted to one side of the pod. It lit up and chirped busily as the last few credits were wrung out of it. 'Spaceport, please,' she said to the driver.

The gull-wing door raised slowly. 'You're too good to me,' smiled Lou as she jumped in, collapsing into the comfy, padded seat. Benny followed her.

'Don't I know it,' she said as the door began to close.

As the cab pulled away, Benny looked glumly up at the Slarvian Imperial Museum one last time, thinking about the missed opportunity to see one of the great treasures of the universe. Oh, well, she shrugged, she could always come back another day.

It wasn't like the Pearl of Wisdom was going anywhere.

The cab carrying Bernice Summerfield and Louise Bennet trundled lazily into the murky downpour of rain, disappearing round the corner at the end of the street. They completely missed the drama of blaring sirens and the five Slarvian police pods that screeched to a halt before the ornate steps leading to the museum.

High above Slarvia, Benny and Louise's snub-nosed spacepod blasted through the atmosphere and soared away into open space, thrusters burning a cheerful orange.

In the cockpit, Benny sat at the controls, and brought the autopilot online having set course for a vaguely civilised star system where they could get a half-decent brew and a sandwich that didn't taste of mud. The door to the small but comfortable living quarters slid open behind her and Lou stepped into the cockpit, towelling her wet locks, which hung in a damp curtain over her shoulders.

'That's better,' she sighed.

'Washing that Slarvian right out of your hair,' said Benny with a crooked smile, then cried out in mock alarm as Lou's wet towel landed on her head. 'OW'

'Serves you right,' said Lou tartly. 'You've had your moments'

yourself. I remember you looking with half an interested eye at that Yukka sapling on Salomon IV. Apart from it being utterly disgusting, it would also have been cradle snatching.'

'All right,' Benny said good-naturedly as she threw the soggy towel back and raised her hands in submission. 'I won't mention it again!'

Lou caught the towel and grinned. 'Good.' She threw the towel onto her bunk, where it fell on top of her holdall, and skipped over to the co-pilot's chair. 'So, where next?'

'I think it's time to go home.'

Louise sat back. 'Oh.'

The ship swayed imperceptibly as the autopilot made a small course correction and Benny swivelled her chair to face Lou. 'This has been a real giggle, yeah? Just what we both needed. No-holds-barred, anarchic fun. We could go on shouting at the universe for the rest of our lives but, just like philandering ex-boyfriends, everything gets boring after a while.'

Louise slumped back in the chair, bottom lip pouting out to make her look like a petulant child.

'What good would it do to stay out here?' Benny carried on, as gently as possible. 'We need to take our lives back, start looking to the future again.'

'What's the point? It'll all get screwed up by the next man who comes along.'

Benny raised an admonishing finger. 'Not necessarily. Even after what happened, I still have faith that somewhere out there is a man with a good heart, who won't betray me, who will make me go weak at the knees every time I see him and might, just might, bring me breakfast in bed on a Sunday morning.'

'Lucky you.'

'Look, if we don't go back now, who knows where we might end up. Flirting with sentient plant life and bedding gastropods is only the beginning, and I don't want to think about what cess pit this slippery slope might deposit us in.'

Lou looked like she was starting to think about it, shifting in her chair. 'I guess...' she started uncertainly.

Benny leant forward and brushed back a lock of clumped, wet hair that had fallen over Lou's eye. 'Think about the great things we're both going to achieve. Just because we go home, get jobs and start looking to the future, doesn't mean that sisters don't stop doing it for themselves. And if we don't do it now, the future will have passed us by because we'll be face down on the bar, sleeping in a pool of our own drool.'

Benny sat back, quite proud of her little homily. Next to her, Louise seemed to perk up.

'Christ, B, I hope you don't get to make a habit of delivering rousing speeches. I think I'm going to be sick.'

'Watch it,' Benny said, but with a smile. 'Are we agreed then?'

'Agreed.'

The two friends touched their fists together, the pact made.

'But,' said Lou, 'Let's see how much we can squeeze out of our credit sticks. I reckon we might just have enough to buy us each a killer frock and pair of shoes on that outlet asteroid we passed by on the second week.' Lou's eyes widened pleadingly.

'Sounds good to me,' Benny agreed, and swivelled round to face the controls and make the course change. A light started blinking on the control panel. Benny tapped it a couple of times, but it didn't go out. 'Bugger. We'll have to stop off and recharge. There should be a service satellite coming up in a couple of light years.'

'You want the windows doing?' the octopoid at the counter asked Benny, a suckered tentacle snaking forward to take her credit stick. 'I'm very good!' he bubbled. His other arms all held a chamois leather and flailed around in demonstration.

'No thanks,' Benny smiled, glancing over at Louise, who walked towards her down an aisle, arms loaded with chocolate, crisps and gossip magazines. Outside, the Starseeker was parked up against the main fuelling platform of the lone, floating service satellite, heavy-duty charge cable snaking into the pod's input port. Other ships were docked around the large metal mushroom structure that made up the service satellite, a chance to refuel, grab a bite to eat, look at some tat in the shop, or play a space-flight simulator in the ubiquitous arcade. Which, now Benny thought about it, was a bit of a pointless exercise. You'd be better off chucking a credit stick out of the window every couple of light years.

Lou deposited the pile of heavenly saturated fat and starchy carbs on the counter, and looked at Benny with a beseeching grin. Benny rolled her eyes heavenwards and indicated that the octopoid should add them to the bill. The credit stick whirled in the slot, before it was handed back by a tentacle. Benny pulled it away with a slurping, sucking sound as the octopoid's suckers gave it up. Behind him, above the counter, a large screen relayed a newscast of stories from around the system.

'Anything happening?' Benny asked.

The octopoid blinked its single eye. 'Nah, not really. Ooh, that fillum star, what's his name... Clarendon Blackheath.'

Lou leaned forward. She was a sucker (ahem) for celeb stories. 'Oh, yeah, he's sexy.'

'Oh, please,' Benny moaned with a shudder. 'He's a Killoran.'

The octopoid ignored them. 'Gave birth to a nice litter of pups.'

'Really?' said Lou. She dived for a celebrity mag in her pile of booty.

'Nothing important, then?' Benny asked. 'We've been out of the loop for a bit.' She glanced at the screen, which had changed again. Benny's brow furrowed. 'Hey, I recognise that...'

The screen showed a giant snail, speaking into a microphone held in a spindly hand, before it changed to a shot of the outside of the Slarvian Imperial Museum. Flashing lights played out over the sweeping towers, cast from the tops of the multiple police pods parked outside. Uniformed Slarvians slimed trails back and forth as they moved with as much urgent intent as a giant snail could.

'Hey Lou, come and look. It's Slarvia, on the telly!'

Louise's head snapped round at Benny's words and she looked up at the screen. Her eyes widened and she visibly whitened, before regaining some measure of composure. 'Oh, really?' she asked with bizarre nonchalance. 'That's nice.' She tottered over to the counter and began to gather up the provisions. 'Time to go Benny.'

'Oh, hang on, I want to watch this. We were there this morning,' she said to the octopoid, who just blinked in reply.

'No, Benny. Going now.' Lou grabbed Benny and thrust her towards the docking tube that led back to the Starseeker. 'Bye!' she shouted to the octopoid.

The octopoid's single, milky yellow eye watched the two bizarre human females clatter back down the docking tube to their spacepod, its tentacles flailing slowly in thought. They disappeared inside the pod and, seconds later, the docking tube and charge cable retracted and the little ship's engines fired. The octopoid blinked once as the pod powered away from his thriving little refuelling business. He watched it recede into the distance until it was indistinguishable from the sheet of twinkling stars, before turning to look up at the screen.

The screen showed a picture of two human females. The creature looked back at the direction the pod had taken, looked back at the screen, and looked back out into space.

A single tentacle snaked forward and picked up the com unit attached to the wall...

'I don't know what's got into you since we left Slarvia,' said Benny as she munched on a mouthful of crisps. Some vintage Earth rock music was piping into the cockpit - the Rolling Stones, perfect for cruising the space lanes. Lou sat next to her in the co-pilot's seat, feet up on the control panel, flicking absently through a magazine. She didn't say anything, but every now and then she leant forward and performed a sensor sweep of surrounding space. Every time it showed up negative, she seemed to relax and went back to the mag, only to repeat the process a couple of minutes later. Benny thought it was best to ignore it.

'I'm getting a drink.' she said, rising to her feet and stretching. 'Want one?'

'No,' Lou replied absently as Benny stepped over to the food dispenser.

'I was thinking,' Benny burbled on as she keyed in a sequence, 'that we should meet up one night every week...'

Behind her, Lou leant forward and set the sensors going.

'... you know, for a girl's night out...'

The sensor display flared green as it made a signal contact, and a low, keening beep sounded on the control panel. Lou's eyes widened in horror.

'... just because we're calming down a bit, doesn't mean we have to be nuns or anything...'

'Benny.'

'... a few drinks, a bite to eat, flirt with some guys...'

'Benny.'

'... just the kind of things a couple of about-town girls get up to...'

'Benny!'

Benny whipped round, forgetting her drink. 'What? Did you press the wrong button again...'

Louise sat rigid with fear, a shaking finger pointing out of the main viewport, mouth opening and closing but no sound was coming out.

Benny followed the line of her finger, out into space beyond, but her eyes didn't get very far because they suddenly found themselves looking at a very large, very scary battle cruiser, complete with very large, very scary guns.

'Where the frag did that come from!' Benny screamed, running and literally diving for the pilot's chair and control panel. Next to her, Louise still had her hand pointing limply out at the ship.

Benny toggled the controls and accessed the ship's transponder signal. 'I don't understand. It's the Slarvian Imperial flagship.'

Louise suddenly found her voice. 'And those must be its friends,' she said quietly, finally dropping her hand.

Benny glanced up. Behind the flagship, diamond flares flashed against the blackness as more ships dropped out of hyperspace. And more ships. And more ships. Then, just to complete the set, a few more blasted into reality. Benny sank back in her chair, trying to take in the scene playing out in front of her eyes. She blinked, hoping she might be imaging things.

She wasn't.

The control panel started bleeping frantically. 'I think we're being hailed by the flagship,' she said in a high-pitched squeak.

'Erm... Yes,' agreed Benny calmly.

'Should we answer?' asked Lou, equally calmly.

'Yeah. Why not.'

Benny hit a switch and the screen in the middle of the control panel blurred up from nothing into a frighteningly clear image of a Slarvian who, it was fair to say, didn't look very happy.

'Pirates and plunderers of Slarvia!' gargled the Slarvian. 'This is Supreme Commander Klaarshinarg of the Imperial Slarvian Battle Fleet!'

Benny and Louise waved cheerily at the commander. 'Hello!'

The commander's feelers waved around in wild agitation. 'You are ordered to power down your engines and prepare to be boarded! You will surrender the most sacred property of our glorious empire, and be taken back to Slarvia to stand trial for your crimes against the Emperor!'

Benny cut the volume, leaving the Slarvian raging away in mute anger. The two friends sat in silence, save for the hum and ping of the Starseeker's systems. As the seconds ticked on, Louise started to shake and the colour bleached slowly from her face.

Benny swivelled round to face her friend who suddenly looked about 12 years old and very frightened. 'Erm... Lou... I've got a funny feeling you might have something to tell me.'

Aboard the Slarvian flagship, Supreme Commander Klaarshinarg oozed and squirmed in its command cot, oily, broiling vapours funnelling up from grilles bolted into the floor of the command deck to keep the atmosphere at the optimum humidity. Dotted around the deck, at stations that appeared to be grown rather than manufactured, Slarvians worked to keep the enormous vessel functioning.

'Weapons stations!' boomed the commander: its burbling voice echoing from bulkhead to bulkhead. A quartet of Slarvians gargled in the affirmative. 'Target the fugitives' vessel. All weapons! In the name of the Emperor and the First Mother, we will blast their thieving bodies from the heavens!'

Benny folded her arms, pursed her lips and stared.

The Pearl of Wisdom twinkled back.

There it was, a perfect, glowing sphere, sitting incongruously on top of Louise's holdall next to last night's dirty knickers and a pair of straightening irons.

'Well?' Louise asked hopefully from the bunk where she sat, hand on the bag's zip which she had just opened to reveal one of the billion wonders of the universe.

Benny swallowed. 'I just want to get this clear. You stole the Pearl of Wisdom?'

'Yeah.'

'You stole the Pearl of Wisdom!' Benny shrieked as loud as she could.

'Better?'

Benny swallowed and nodded. 'Much, thanks. There's just one thing I need to ask. Erm... why?'

Lou shrugged. 'Because it was there. Er, Benny, are you going to shout again?'

Benny ran a hand through her hair, which she realised was badly in need of shampoo and conditioner. 'No, no. Why would I shout? My best friend has just told me she stole the heritage of a once war-mongering civilisation, laid by the First Mother of the Slarvians and fabled to have been the source of all power in the Empire, because it was there. Now, perhaps, before the Slarvian Imperial Battle Fleet melts us into oblivion, you might want to tell me how you managed to pull off the heist of the millennium...'

'Well, Bob was trying to impress me.'

'The fact that Bob the Slarvian was a giant randy snail clearly not being enough for you.'

'You know he was a security guard at the museum. He started jangling his keys, being the big snail, told me I didn't have to wait until opening time and did I want to come and see his Pearl of Wisdom...'

Benny shook her head in despair. 'And you slept with this loser after a killer chat-up line like that?'

'I told you, he was cute. Anyway,' Lou carried on breathlessly. 'he took me into the museum at like three in the morning. It was very dark and very spooky, but quite romantic. but blimey, Slarvian art is a bit bloody weird. And there it was, right in the middle, nestling in the open shell of this enormous statue of a Slarvian. The Pearl of Whatsit, just sitting there.'

Benny's eyebrow arched. 'And now it's sitting here.'

'Well, you'd been banging on about the damn thing since we arrived on Slarvia, you being an archaeology daftie and all that...

'And?' Benny was getting impatient, and she imagined the angry Slarvians sitting a couple of hundred metres away were feeling the same.

'So I took it.'

Benny blinked. 'Just like that?'

'Bob had slithered away to find some booze, and I was left alone with this... thing. It was so shiny and pretty.' Lou patted the top of the Pearl, and Benny fought the urge to spit on a hankie and polish her fingerprints off it. 'And in that split second it all came back to me. the reason why we're out here. Hell hath no fury, shout at the universe, sisters until the end, drink the bar dry. So I just picked up the Pearl and stuck it in my bag.'

'But why?'

'Because I thought it might be a laugh, one final act of anarchy. And most of all, I thought you might be pleased.'

'Lou, you're not my cat. I don't expect to find you at the door with a dead bird every morning. And if we don't figure a way out of this, that's exactly what we'll be. Dead birds.'

Lou's face fell. 'I guess I've been really stupid.' She bit her lip and thought for a second. 'Couldn't we just give it back?'

The control panel beeped urgently, and Benny ran back to the pilot's seat, trying to ignore the battleships in the window, blocking out the space beyond. 'Er, I doubt it, I think they've just powered up weapons.'

'What?' squeaked Lou as she trotted up to join Benny. 'All of them? I don't think there's enough of us to go round.'

'They'll probably find enough,' Benny flicked the audio link open, to find Supreme Commander Klaarshinarg was still wibbling on. She breathed out hard, ruffled her hair and came to a decision. 'Lou. Hold on to your handbag. I'm going to try something,'

* * *

Thirty-eight Slarvian battleships hung in space, dwarfing the Starseeker spacepod. Even a confirmed non-gambler would have a punt on those odds.

Without warning, the Starseeker sprang into life, performing a neat three-point turn in space before the twin engines fired brightly and the small but perfectly formed craft jumped forward and was lost amongst the stars.

'That was your plan?' Lou shrieked, clinging on to the arms of her chair, the cabin shaking and buffeting around them, stars zipping rapidly past the window. 'Hit the run-like-fun button?'

Benny gritted her teeth and pushed the engines still further. 'Works every time. I suddenly remembered what Slarvians do to thieves. And before you ask, I'm too good a friend to tell you.'

'Thanks. Are they following us?'

Proximity alerts started pinging around the control panel. 'That would be a yes.'

When the Starseeker had burst into life, Supreme Commander Klaarshinarg had almost blinked and missed it. It spent the next 0.7 manklags stuttering in surprise before all four segments of its brain kicked in and realised what the cursed thieves had done. It had been expecting the bipeds to cower, beg for forgiveness and lose bladder control in the shadow of the mighty Imperial Slarvian Battle Fleet. But no, they'd run like the treacherous cowards they were. If they escaped, the Emperor would have Klaarshinarg served up with butter.

With the luxury of time, Klaarshinarg would have loved to conjure up a speech that was both inspirational and commanding, something worthy of the great Mollusc Laureate itself. Sadly, the best it could manage was a spluttered: 'After them!'

The gargantuan Slarvian warcraft heaved round on their axes before firing every thruster simultaneously, sending the fleet lurching after the Starseeker.

Benny's teeth started chattering as the Starseeker began to vibrate sickeningly. The little hula girl on the dashboard had vanished in a blur of rhythm, and debris accumulated from the girls' road trip slid off brushed silver worktops and crashed to the floor. Starseekers were not supposed to vibrate like this.

'Starseekers aren't supposed to shake like this!' shouted Lou as she read from the sales brochure.

'Starseekers aren't supposed to go this fast!' replied Benny as another alarm kicked off, adding to the symphony of klaxons already screaming for attention.

Benny glanced down at the speedo. Yup, they were way past the acceleration curve of a top-of-the-line starship, let alone a little space-pod like this. But, and here was the thing, they were still managing to outrun the entire Slarvian Battle Fleet and hadn't exploded into a shiny ball of flame and space dust.

Right, so that was one impossible thing before breakfast. Five more to go!

Louise groaned and clutched her stomach, her face transmuting from terrified white to hyper-sickness green, the incandescent glow being cast off the Pearl of Wisdom adding an eerie sheen.

Benny leaned over and pulled a sick bag out of the handy dispenser and passed it over. 'Take this. You look like you need...'

Wait a crukking minute! Benny sat up and looked straight forward into the blur of stars passing by the window. Incandescent glow being cast off the Pearl of Wisdom?

Benny performed a classic, comedy double take. On the bunk, where it had been discarded in the face of more pressing matters, the Pearl of Wisdom was happily emitting a cheerful glow of bright light, a stark contrast to the milky-white, non-shiny state it had been in when Lou had revealed her felony.

Lou turned to join in Benny in wide-eyed appraisal of the brightly shining artefact.

Commander Klashinaarg leant forward as far as the large shell on its back would allow. On the screen, the Starseeker continued to confound the superior might of the pursuing fleet.

'Weapons stations!' he roared. 'Fire a warning shot off their port side!'

'Yes, Commander!'

Seconds later, an explosion blossomed in a greeny-yellow ball off the port side of the vessel, almost sending it into a spin, but somehow the biped pilot managed to keep it on course.

'Prepare to fire ag...'

A klaxon echoed around the command chamber, stopping the commander short. 'Report!' he demanded.

'Commander, the fleet will enter star system 277181-X in 0.001 manklags. The bipeds' craft has strayed too close to the sun and their heat shields are no longer functioning.'

The scanner screen was now dominated by me angry rea Dail 277181 -X, and the Starseeker had come to a dead halt before it_

'Bollocks, bollocks, bollocks, bollocks...'

Benny and Louise gawped at the burning orange star. The star burned back, vivid red prominences curling towards them through the inky void.

Klashinaarg's feelers probed the hot, fetid air of the command chamber in confusion.

'Why do the bipeds not succumb to the energy of the sun?!'

Benny's head shot up and she looked directly at the orange ball. Then she looked at Louise, her mouth curling into a half smile, eyes reflecting the orange of the sun. 'I've got an idea...'

Aboard the Slarvian mothership, the Supreme Commander squirmed in its command cot as it stared at the shuttlepod on the main viewscreen, the burning sun hanging before it like a tasteless medallion. Its antennae waved around wildly as it raised itself to the communicator.

'Commander to all ships,' it rasped in guttural Slarvian. 'Open fire. All weapons!'

Klashinaarg rubbed its small, clutching hands together in anticipation of the glory the Emperor would lavish upon it when it brought news of the bipedal infidels' utter destruction back to Slarvia. Missiles, phasers and torpedoes blasted across the void towards the tiny ship...

... and all missed as the Starseeker suddenly leapt forward and dived into the surface of the broiling sun.

Aboard the Starseeker all was calm. The vibrations had stopped, the hula girl was still, and the cabin had a serenity that belied the fact that Benny and Louise were flying, quite unharmed, through the heart of a sun as if it were a Sunday afternoon drive in the country.

The two girls said nothing as they stared, fascinated, out of the window at the burning gaseous body of the sun that cocooned them. Between them, sitting on the dashboard, the Pearl of Wisdom glowed the same red as the bubbling fiery sea outside.

'You see,' Benny said quietly, 'I started to remember my Slarvian history, and the legends surrounding the Pearl. The fact that we were

pushing the ship's engines far beyond the capabilities of a Starseeker pod, that we hadn't been blasted out of space by the Slarvians and that, without heat shields, we hadn't been burnt to ashes next to the sun, it got me thinking that the supposed powers of the Pearl might be more than just an old wives' tale.'

The Starseeker buffeted imperceptibly as Benny placed a hand on the warmly glowing orb. It had a comforting warmth to it. 'They said the Pearl was supposed to empower and protect whoever possessed it, like Earth's so-called Spear of Destiny. That it could transmute the energy around it like an enormous power transformer.' Benny laughed nervously. 'Turns out it was true.'

As a confused Slarvian Battle Fleet hung in space, wondering just what had happened to the biped fugitives who had just dived into the sun, on the other side of the star, a Starseeker spacepod burst forth from the surface. Red tendrils of gaseous energy grabbed at the edges of the craft but, with a blast of the engines, the small spacecraft broke free and accelerated away into space.

Behind them, the Slarvian Battle Fleet remained oblivious.

In the cabin of the Starseeker, the Pearl of Wisdom had returned to its dormant state, Benny and Louise's faces reflected in its mirrored surface. Ahead of them lay beautiful Slarvian free space.

Louise sat back. 'So erm... Benny?'

'Yes?'

'You knew that was going to happen, right? That we could dive into the heart of a sun to shake off a pursuing battle fleet and that we'd be completely safe?'

Benny considered for a second. Tell the truth or lie through her teeth? What the hell... 'No. Absolutely no idea what would happen. Total gamble.'

The two friends sat in silence for a minute. Louise sniffed then rose to her feet.

'Coffee?' she asked casually.

Benny cleared her throat. 'Yeah, thanks. Lovely.'

Benny winced as a mechanical hand slapped a 'FRAGILE' sticker on a pearl-shaped package wrapped in brown paper and tied with a bow.

Benny and Louise heaved the package across the post office desk to the drudger, who scooped it up into his spindly metal arms. The address label said: 'The Emperor of the Slarvians, Slarvia, The

Universe. The greeting card attached to the package declared a cheery: 'Sorry! Xoxoxoxoxo.'

'Your package is safe with us,' whirled the drudger as it tossed the box absently over its shoulder where it was caught by a tractor beam and whisked into the bowels of the sorting office. 'Thank you for choosing Mutters Spiral Express. We get it there.'

You'd better, thought Benny as she and Louise and walked out of the busy post office.

And then they were on the street, just two normal girls going about their business, having less than a week ago flown through the heart of a sun and now put one of the wonders of the universe in second-class post all the way back to Slarvia.

There had been a moment when, holding a totem of unlimited supremacy in her hand, Benny had flirted with the idea of making herself Empress of the Universe, but had a sneaking suspicion that absolute power would get absolutely on her tits after a while.

Besides, thought Benny as she linked arms with Lou and they walked happily down the bustling street, it was time to grow up and face the real world. You couldn't spend your whole life bombing around the universe, solving other people's cock-ups, escaping certain death and being chased by hideous, slimy space-monsters, could you?

Who in their right mind would want a life like that?

Charged

John Binns

6 - 'In here,' said the guard as he showed Benny into her cell.

|| 'I guessed,' she said. It was a tiny little room in pastel pink, with a bench against one wall. She turned just in time to see the guard pull the door to behind her, and a brief flourish of keys in his hand. 'But thanks anyway.'

There was an awful clunking sound as the door locked behind her. She watched the guard's cowed head disappear from view behind the frosted glass of the tiny window in the cell door, and turned round again.

There seemed nothing else for it but to sit down on the bench. Its surface was as hard as stone.

'So,' she said out loud to herself. 'That went well.'

As so many things in Benny's life had recently, it had started with a pint of beer.

'I seem to be drinking yours,' the old man had said, sounding more sad than sorry. 'It's just that they look the same. But I can get you another.'

She had frowned at him at first, she was sad to recall - irritated just at the fact he had spoken. The public bar in what was laughingly called the tourist quarter of Slow's World had few charms, the most

compelling being its safe distance from the military base, but in her present mood the fact that punters rarely spoke to each other was one of them. She realised with a start that apart from staff at her hostel and the bar manager here, he was the first person to speak to her in a week.

'If that's a chat-up line,' she said, 'it's a very odd one.'

The man squinted at her, and for a moment it seemed like his whole face wrinkled up like a prune. 'Are you old enough to be drinking?' he said.

'And that's even odder.'

She looked at him warily. Shoulders hunched, patchy grey hair, sad grey eyes, a corduroy jacket. He seemed harmless enough. 'Pint of bitter, then,' she said with a shrug.

She never did find out for sure why he'd been drinking her beer, although as she got to know him better it seemed like absent-mindedness was a perfectly in-character explanation. Then again, if it was his way of reaching out to make a friend on this dismal, lonely planet, it had worked out pretty well.

Despite herself too, Benny had to admit that having Graham to talk to had made her stay on Slow's World pass a lot more quickly. Plus, now she had someone to buy beer for her there was no reason to risk using her fake ID.

The only thing, in retrospect, that she should have picked up on and tagged 'suspicious' was the reluctance Graham had to talk about himself. She'd put it down to shyness, awkwardness, or something like that, with what she'd like to think was a healthy respect for other people's privacy, but could just have been a lack of interest. It might have been terrible, but in current circumstances Benny was quite happy to find someone with whom she could moan about the weather, quote dialogue from old movies, even enthuse at about archaeology. Blokeish, inconsequential, bar-room conversation. She'd have talked about football, if she'd understood the first thing about it.

There were hints, though, that she should have picked up on. Like the first conversation they had about the old city, somewhere during the third and fourth pint on the second night, almost ten days ago.

'You said you were avoiding the military,' he said, apparently apropos of nothing.

She spluttered a bit on her beer. 'I never said that,' she said, wondering instantly just how much worse she could have made that

sound. 'I just didn't want to go to a bar full of soldiers, that's all. I have... issues. Er. With soldiers.' She saw his eyebrows raise. 'No, not in that way.'

She frowned, and decided to change the subject. 'It's the city I'm here for,' she said.

'The ruins? Aha.' He gave her a knowing wink.

She was about to be paranoid, and then remembered she'd told him an hour ago that she was interested in archaeology.

'But the dig's closed down, hasn't it?'

'Well, yes, officially,' she said, trying to sound casual about it. 'In fact they say it's on hold, all operations suspended for some reason. It's been about a year. The rumour is that some company's bought up the site, and they're going through the legal wrangles before they abandon the dig and just build on top of it.'

'I heard something about that,' Graham said. 'It'd be criminal.' He turned and gave a hard stare at a young Draconian girl, who was considering putting something on the jukebox.

'That's what I thought. So now's the last chance, probably, to do a little exploration of my own.' She leaned over the table conspiratorially and opened her coat, showing him the object in her top pocket.

His eyebrows raised. 'You won't get far with one trowel, surely,' he said, a bit too harshly. She tried not to let her bubble of enthusiasm burst.

'I might,' she said. And then, surprising herself: 'You could come with me if you want.'

He laughed softly. 'I don't think kneeling in mud would do my rheumatism any good. And besides, I don't want security guards hauling me in for trespassing, or there'd be all sorts of trouble.' She gave him a blank look. 'I like to stay out of the way of authority too,' he said with a small smile.

She might have pursued the point if she'd had more time, or been less full of beer. But as it was, she just smiled back.

'I am rather envious though, I must say,' he said then. 'Helen and I used to travel a lot together, explore places. Find things out. It's not the same nowadays.'

And instead of asking any more open a question, she'd asked him: 'So, where do you live?'

'I have a little ship,' he said in reply. 'Berthed about a mile from here, not far from the ruins.' He suddenly looked very sad. 'It's broken down now, though. No more travelling for me.'

She reached out her hand for his, but he had picked up his beer with it. She nodded in sympathy instead.

It was the first and last time he had talked about Helen, or the ship, she realised now.

The last time, that was, until the trial.

Graham was arrested nine days later - late yesterday morning. They'd actually come to the bar, knowing that he'd be there for elevenses. Benny found out later, when she rolled in for her evening session, covered in mud and dust. She assumed at first that the bar manager's expression was dismay at the state of her clothes, but instead it was the dread of someone who had to convey bad news.

Two constables had escorted him out, he said. Told him he was under arrest for espionage. He hadn't resisted, and he hadn't explained. He'd even offered them some of his peanuts.

It was never the ones you expected, he said. Fancy that, Graham a spy. All these years. Just imagine. He'd miss him, of course.

Benny almost shrieked. 'But that's ridiculous!' she said.

She was at the police station within the hour, most of which time was spent getting lost. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so angry. Graham, a spy? She'd never heard anything so utterly stupid.

Unless he was, of course. In which case, she was the stupid one. She thought briefly about what military secrets she might have divulged while they were talking, before she realised she didn't know any. At least she could rest assured he wasn't just pretending to be her friend for professional reasons. She supposed even spies needed time off.

'He's called Graham something,' she found herself saying weakly at the police station, after barging her way to the front of the queue. 'I'm, er, his niece. Bernice the niece. Oh, cruk, no, forget it. My name's Benny,' she said. 'I'm his friend.'

She waited several hours at their front desk, getting scraps of information from time to time. The young man and woman on duty were civilians, trained to take messages and take the flak for their police colleagues. Benny was told that Graham was being interviewed, that he was having DNA taken, that his ship was being searched; later, that he'd been charged, would be kept in overnight, that he'd be appearing in court in the morning.

The charge, the woman told her, was obtaining official secrets with

intent to assist the Enemy. No, she couldn't tell her any more than that. No, it wasn't their policy to pass on messages, or bars of chocolate, or sherbet lemons. He'd be able to see a duty lawyer at court, when the case would be heard by the special tribunal. And no, Benny wouldn't be able to talk to him before the hearing.

When she did get to sleep that night, she dreamed of her dad in a cell, somewhere far away from her. Harassed, afraid and alone.

The duty lawyer turned out to be a bearded man in a shabby suit, looking stressed and busy, a dozen or so files under his arm. She managed to collar him on his way into court, about twenty minutes after the van had arrived with the morning's prisoners. He'd have time to talk to her after the trial, he assured her. The case seemed straightforward. No, 'routine enough' was what he'd actually said. A routine case. Her friend, about to go to prison.

A constable arrived, to give evidence against him. The prosecution lawyer was brief. How, he asked him, had the police come to their conclusion that the accused was guilty of spying?

The constable said they'd acted on information received, the nature of which could not, taken as a whole, be divulged in open court. He was at liberty to say that local citizens had corroborated the allegation, with three in particular that he would highlight for the court. He pulled a small sheaf of papers from out of his satchel, handed copies to the tribunal and the lawyers.

The tribunal members listened with minimal interest. There were three of them, a middle-aged man sitting as chairman in the middle; two women, both elderly, either side. The one on the left looked about ready to nod off.

The first witness, said the constable, was a former colleague, with whom the accused had worked on Gula Prime just over two years ago. She'd testified to him that the accused had expressed what she called radical opinions, including that the Enemy were 'pretty good at what they did'. The woman on the left of the chairman wrinkled her nose a bit at this, as if it were the sort of comment that made her feel a little queasy.

The second witness was a health and safety inspector, who'd visited the accused's ship that summer and been impolitely told to leave. He'd formed the opinion he was hiding something, although he couldn't say exactly what. Something on the ship was using a lot of power and that 'couldn't be anything good. The constable read out the quotation, as if it carried more weight that way.

The third witness, disconcertingly, was the bar manager. Benny wondered whether he'd known at the time he'd spoken to the constable that his words would be used in court. She'd prefer to think not, but then she'd no reason to trust him particularly. The accused kept himself to himself, the manager had said. But he'd heard him talk about owning a ship, and about disliking the military. He knew he'd travelled once, which at first he claimed he'd done alone. But then, he'd talked about someone called Helen, as if she were a wife or a partner. He'd pressed him on it, but he'd clammed up. He said he couldn't risk 'them' finding out.

The constable finished reading, put his papers into a folder and shut it. He then said he and a colleague had interviewed the accused yesterday evening. Three and a half hours they'd fired questions at him, apparently, and he hadn't answered a single one. That looked guilty, he said, in his book. He invited the court to find the same.

He finished by pressing them for a sentence of five years' imprisonment. The prosecution lawyer respectfully agreed, and closed his case.

Benny leaned forward in the public gallery, waiting anxiously for the cross-examination.

The defence lawyer stood up. 'I wonder if I might speak to my client,' he said. The tribunal chairman nodded.

Benny craned her neck to try to see Graham in the dock, but couldn't: the courtroom was designed to prevent it. But she saw the defence lawyer whispering something to him, waiting for a response, and whispering back. He came back to his place.

'That's true,' he said, 'he didn't say anything,' and sat down again.

Nothing was said for a moment. 'There are a number of matters,' the chairman said, 'that need to be considered in private. We shall adjourn for 15 minutes while this is done.'

Benny leapt to her feet, and almost grabbed the defence lawyer as he dashed from the courtroom. 'What the hell was that?' she demanded. 'Won't there be a defence?'

'If he won't say anything,' the man shrugged. 'I'm sorry.'

'So what now? What's this secret evidence?'

It was clearly a stupid question. 'If I knew, I couldn't tell you,' was all she got. 'If you'll excuse me.'

He was out of the door before she realised her mouth was still open.

My name's Bernice,' she said into the intercom for the cells area. when they asked who it was. 'I want to visit one of the prisoners:

'It's legal visits only,' said a bored-sounding girl's voice at the other end.

Benny steeled herself. 'Yes yes, I mean I'm Bernice Summerfield, from Summerfield and Partners,' she said briskly. 'And it *is* rather urgent, if you don't mind.'

There was a brief pause, during which she found herself uttering a silent prayer. And then they buzzed her through.

'Yes, I'm surprised it worked too.' She shrugged at him. 'Now, what's going on?'

The visiting room was barely big enough for one person, let alone two, and the pale green decor was off-putting. Graham was looking dolefully at her from across the table. But she was more furious than she could put into words, and that gave her enough energy for both of them.

'They've got it in for me, is what's going on.' He looked dog-tired, and sadder than ever. 'I'm sorry, Benny. I don't think I can fight them.'

'Seriously?' She frowned at him. 'We'll see about that. But you're not a spy, right?'

He shrugged. 'Depends on what you mean by the word.'

'Oh, come on. Like they're saying. For, you know.' She did a little mime of a plunger arm and a gun-stick. like they did at school.

He looked disappointed, but probably more at the mime than the accusation. 'Hoping to bring down the human race?' He smiled weakly. 'Tempted sometimes. I'll admit.' he said. 'Especially today. But no:

'Well, what's this about, then? Something to do with... Helen?'

He looked at her apologetically. 'I really can't say.' he said. 'I promised her. There'd really be trouble.'

She actually waved her arms at him, frantically. 'You're not in enough trouble now?' she almost yelled. 'Five years' imprisonment?'

'The case sounds weak.' he said.

Not as weak as your lawyer!

'Maybe you should take over.'

She stared at him.

The usher called them back after the adjournment. It felt more like thirty minutes than 15, but it still wasn't nearly enough. Benny was shaking as she stepped up to the defence lawyer's position.

'Excuse me, Miss...?'

'Ms: she said instinctively. The chairman seemed puzzled. perhaps mildly annoyed by her presence. But she steeled herself again, and looked him in the eye. 'Summerfield,' she went on. 'I'm the new defence counsel.'

'You're very young,' he said.

She was wrong-footed. 'Well, I work out,' she managed to say. There was an awkward silence, a hint of a cough. Possibly some tumbleweed.

'We have reviewed the expert evidence over the adjournment,' the chairman said, 'and find there is a strong case for the accused to answer. Now, if he continues to say nothing...'

Benny leaned forward, enough to move the desk a few inches with an embarrassing squeak across the floor. 'Hang on just a minute,' she said out loud, thinking belatedly that there must have been a better way to say it. 'I have a few, er, points to add.'

She saw their eyebrows raise. The chairman seemed to write something on his notepad. 'Go on,' he prompted.

'Er, yes,' she said. She looked down at her own papers for inspiration, but there was only a doodle of a cat. 'The evidence you've heard, your honours, is rubbish. That man before the break, the constable...'

'Miss Summerfield...'

'... said nothing, if you really think about it. He was just passing on what other people were saying. And those people aren't here. Who cares what some woman on Gula Prime thought about Graham, if she can't be bothered to come here and say so? She might be off her head, or have a grudge against him. Maybe her memory's faulty - it was years ago.'

She stopped for just long enough to realise how terrified she was, and gulped.

'But how are we going to know, if she's not here? And the same with this safety guy, and that bloody bar manager. At least we can get him here later, if we want. I think he's making half of it up.'

'If you mean that it's hearsay, Miss Summerfield,' said the chairman. 'we do take into account...'

'I just think it's unfair,' she interrupted, 'to take these things as read when there's no way to test them. And another thing: just what is it we're meant to think about someone based on them expressing an opinion? If I said. I don't know, that the president was a total idiot, would you think that was evidence I was a spy?'

She risked a brief glance at the tribunal at this point. She wasn't sure they'd understood it as rhetorical.

'We don't lock people up for their opinions,' she went on, 'or for the kind of person they are. Yes, Graham's a surly type, and he doesn't like answering questions about himself.'

She looked briefly back at her friend in the dock, and was slightly put off to see his expression of alarm.

'But that doesn't make him guilty of anything,' she finished. 'Um. Not really.'

There was a disarming shuffling of papers, as if the tribunal had assumed she was finished. In a sane world, she thought, she wouldn't even have started doing something like this. But she was flying now, kept up by sheer panic and fury, and it would take a lot to bring her back down again.

'I haven't finished yet,' she found herself saying. 'If, you know, I can continue...'

The chairman nodded grudgingly. The woman on the right gave what might have been a smile of encouragement, but could just as easily have been mild pity.

'Now, during that recess thing, I mean during the break, there was some secret evidence that I've not got the first idea about. For all I know Graham might know what it is, but he might not.' She took a breath. 'And either way, it's got to be unfair for you to see and hear whatever it all was, believing every word and drawing your own conclusions, without letting him at least have a look in.'

The chairman was nodding vigorously. 'We appreciate your concern, Miss Summerfield. The issues with regard to confidential intelligence are well rehearsed in case law. The court is always mindful of the fair trial issues involved, when it comes to decide on admissibility.'

She was wrong-footed for a moment, caught off guard by the jargon. It was then that she noticed the stern-looking young man with the moustache and the clipboard, sitting at the side of the court not a foot away from her, exchanging a glance with the prosecution lawyer. He hadn't been there before the break, she thought.

Discomfited, she didn't seem to have time to think of a better way to say it. 'Who's that?' she asked bluntly, pointing in the man's general direction. She hadn't meant the gesture to be threatening, but the man visibly flinched as the finger swerved towards him.

'Miss Summerfield,' the chairman said again, with the air of a man whose patience had worn thin. 'If you're not capable of observing the

proper decorum of this court, you'll leave it or be charged with contempt.'

At this point though the woman who had smiled at Benny before leaned over, whispered something discreetly in his ear.

'I will, however, allow the question to be answered.'

The prosecution lawyer stood up, a little awkwardly. 'This gentleman is from military intelligence,' he said, as if to a wayward child.

'Oh.' She looked back at him for a moment, made a split-second decision. 'So this' - and, much more easily than she thought, she'd grabbed the clipboard with her right hand - 'would be the secret evidence, would it?'

'Miss Summerfield!'

She was barely aware of the tribunal chairman shouting something at her, and what seemed like three or four burly security men swarming towards her with improbable speed. She tried to focus instead on the few printed sheets of paper on the clipboard she now held in both hands, gripping on to it for dear life. It was full of charts: numbers and dates; meaningless unless she knew what to look for.

The heading on the first sheet gave her a clue, though. *Record of Communications*, it said.

She carried on staring at the charts, until it dawned on her.

'This is a record of Graham's ship receiving information,' she said. 'From...' She flicked through the pages with a trembling hand, not finding anything that told her the answer. Then: 'Oh, yes. From something within a collection range of ten kilometres. And with a hell of a lot of data. I see. Well.'

The security men were hovering around her, waiting for a cue from the tribunal. Astonishingly, she thought, it hadn't come yet. But she felt trapped even so.

She looked back at Graham. He gave her a pleading look, though what he was pleading for she couldn't tell. Forgiveness?

But you're not a spy, right? she'd asked him. *Depends on what you mean by the word,* he'd said.

There was something about those charts that bothered her. She looked back at the first two pages, and then the next two, where the figures appeared in a different column.

She held out the clipboard to her friend with the moustache. 'This second set of figures,' she said. 'What are they about?'

The man looked a little lost, as if he wasn't sure whether to answer. 'Just more of the same,' he said at length.

She looked at them again. 'But the dates are identical, aren't they?'

He looked quizzically at her. She handed the clipboard back. And after a moment, he said: 'Well, yes. That's communications going the other way.'

The chairman's interest seemed piqued. 'This wasn't raised earlier...' he started.

'From the base to Graham?' Benny said out loud. 'Or from somewhere else. From...' She blinked. 'Yes, from the city! The city, is that it?'

She looked round to see Graham looking nervous.

'That's it! A conversation, something lying there in a supposedly ruined city, is having with...'

She looked at his sad, lonely eyes for a moment longer. She couldn't see him as a technical expert somehow. Or as a husband, come to that.

'...with the ship's computer,' she finished. 'With Helen.'

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the moustached man handing the clipboard up to the tribunal. There was some more shuffling of papers. She could tell by the look on Graham's face that she'd got it right. But why hadn't he said something? Why hadn't he told her?

I really can't say, he'd said. I promised her. There'd really be trouble.

They'd travelled together, all that time, she thought, and now they were stranded. Him, spending the best part of his days and nights alone in that ship, or drinking in the bar. And her, starved of the stimulation of travel, of new places. She'd found something buried in the city, something intelligent. And she'd wanted to protect it.

'I didn't want to get you involved,' Graham told her, in that plaintive way of his. She stuck out her tongue at him.

'I think this puts matters in a very different light,' the chairman was saying. 'It seems clear the accused has not been attempting to access military information.' He conferred briefly with his colleagues to the left and right. 'This court must therefore direct an acquittal. The status of the city computer, however, is an issue we must make the subject of a strict confidentiality order...'

Benny started at the phrase. 'The city computer?' she said. 'You knew there was something there...'

'It will be protected,' the chairman said. 'The purchasing company has its best interests at heart.'

Benny looked back at her friend, expecting him to be as stunned as she was. Instead, he was grinning from ear to ear. She even thought she saw him wink at the chairman.

'Well, bloody hell,' she couldn't help saying. 'Honestly, you people. I thought there was something odd going on there, but this...'

'You've been warned already, Miss Summerfield...'

'... is just bollocks.'

He gave a withering look.

'Oh, cruk,' she said. 'I've gone and done it now, haven't I?'

The guards had been kind enough to give her a copy of the transcript to while her hours away in the cell, and she'd been surprised to find every word very faithfully reproduced in it.

Ms Summerfield: it read. Oh, cruk. I've gone and done it now, haven't I?

Chair: I'm rather afraid you have, Miss Summerfield. Guards, would you take her down to the cells for the rest of the day please?

The accused: I don't think that's right, you know.

Chair: We've been more than fair today, to both of you. Your actions may not have been illegal, but they were pretty unwise. Provided you're prepared to respect the confidentiality order, though, you'll be released immediately.

The accused: Fair enough I suppose. I won't breathe a word.

Chair: I'm glad to hear it. Now, are we able to move on to the next case?

They'd been good to her actually, she thought. They didn't normally let prisoners speak to each other, but no one had stopped her talking to Graham for a few minutes as she passed him on the way to her cell. He'd been visibly exhausted, but nothing short of jubilant. Concerned for her, too. And proud.

She could already hear the guard coming back to her cell, with that rough, heavy sound of the key entering the lock.

She could afford to feel pretty proud of herself too today, she thought. Angry, too, at the thought that things like this could be happening every day on this world, and who knew how many others like it. But proud, that just for one day she'd been brave enough to take on the risk of fighting the system, and had come through just about unscathed, and victorious.

The guards were smiling at her as they showed her out of the cells, out through the back entrance of the court. She emerged into the daylight and saw Graham on the other side of the car park, giving her the broadest grin she'd ever seen on anyone. As she walked towards him, her head held high, she felt like she was lighter than air.

Prime Five

Jason Arnopp

It was her father's face.

No mistaking it. Up there on the wall, close to 50 million holopixels had decided to coalesce in the form of her father's face. While grainy and perhaps a second-generation copy of an image, it was quite unmistakable, virtually filling the rectangular frame. Zippy, zappy news icons hugged the screen's edges, along with scrolling text which Bernice couldn't quite... make out...

Was that the word 'murder'?

Goddess! It was.

The open palm slammed into her left cheek. Sent her reeling backwards. Compared to seeing her father's face, the impact came as little or no surprise. After all, she quickly remembered, she was in the middle of a fight. Before seeing that image of Admiral Isaac Summerfield, she had been in the process of sizing up the bulbous oaf who was angrily approaching. Attempting to judge exactly how he planned to strike.

It was a small bar, awash with neon, endless rows of bottles and empty seats. As the bar-bot was an outmoded model unequipped for defusing conflict, it merely hovered behind the counter, calmly asking whom it could serve. Apparently, the Nuclear Coolant cocktail was to die for.

The only other two customers - two lanky, dark-skinned guys with

bright blue and orange dreads respectively, who Bernice had unaccountably not noticed until now - appeared either side of Fatboy and grabbed his arms. This, she ascertained only with the briefest of glances, before urgently jerking her head back towards that holo-screen.

Her father's face no longer hung in the air. She could vaguely make out the newsreader's blurb: there'd be more on this story as it came in

So what the hell was the story? Young archaeologist gets drunk and hallucinates her missing-presumed-dead army father, like the utter loon that she was?

'Get the hell off me,' growled Fatboy, swinging her two Galahads around like leaves in a gale, their stacked boots skidding on the floor. His left eye was starting to blacken. Had she hit him? Probably, yes. 'She insulted me good. She's getting another slap.'

'You be cool,' gasped the one with blue dreads.

'Calm down now!' added Mr Orange, sounding more desperate than anything else, as Fatboy threatened to shrug him off altogether.

'Perhaps I could recommend a Mars Pyramid?' chirped the bar-bot. 'Mmm. Tasty.'

Bernice wrenched her eyes off the screen and locked them with Fatboy's.

'Whatever you want to do,' she shrugged. 'I don't care. Don't even know what we were fighting about. What I just saw's much more important.'

Fatboy's brow creased.

'After all,' said Bernice. 'I do have a peachy arse. You were right to say so, if not to actually touch it. Put him down, boys. Thanks for your help.'

It was, of course, Fatboy who put Messrs Orange and Blue down, but Bernice felt duty-bound to preserve their dignity. They staggered off to either side, reaching out for table-edges to steady themselves.

Fatboy just stood there, lost and defused.

'Hey! Let's go retro,' parped the bot. 'Guinness all round, yes? Don't worry about the little skirmish, there. I informed the relevant authorities 1.26 seconds after the trouble began.'

Bernice sidled over to the fallen bar stool and retrieved her jacket. Swinging it back over one shoulder, the zip ever-so-slightly grazing Fatboy's left cheek as she did so, Bernice headed out. Once again, the humidity made it feel like she was walking into thick oil. She was sick of it.

She'd clearly spent far too much time painting Iglasia red. It might be wise to stop, before someone painted Iglasia with her. But could she risk returning to the hotel? At least she could watch the news in peace, there.

Whoah. She stumbled, feeling dizzy. Very dizzy.

Those blinding lights, surrounding the bar in a semi-circle, really weren't helping.

'Bernice Summerfield,' said a voice which sounded half robot, half human. 'There's a warrant out on you.'

'No,' she said. 'There was a warrant out on me. Hey, I just saw my dad on TV. What's all that about?'

As if to make the squad's job a little easier, she threw up and keeled over.

Waking up in a cell didn't faze Bernice. She might only have had 23 years behind her, but she had experienced prison and this was positively luxurious compared to some. For one thing, it didn't reek. Soft padded grey-white walls recalled an asylum, but there was a refreshing absence of ugly, old-school bars. An invisible force field prevented her from leaving this ten-foot-cubed space and entering the empty, pale-blue corridor outside. At least, she assumed it did, or Iglasia's law enforcers were highly remiss.

She delved into one pocket, confirming that her weapon had been confiscated. She pulled out a credit. Tossed it towards the entrance. The disc reached the doorway and sharply bounced back.

Yep. Force field confirmed. Now what to do?

Ignore the throbbing head and sandpaper-dry mouth, for a start. Block out the drunken, profane buzz of the inmates in adjacent cells. Then work out exactly what had happened last night. Hell, what had been happening all week...

Her father's face came back to her in a flash. Then the word 'murder. A grim combination of dread and a need to know gripped her: had his body been found?

The prospect of closure was terrifying. Would it be a good thing? She'd come to believe him dead, but part of her still expected to see him in her peripheral vision. Oh, yes, in this regular daydream she would turn to see him standing there, arms folded, fingers rhythmically drumming against his arms, waiting for her to spot him. He'd grin. Hug her. Explain all. Apologise for letting her think he was dead: it had only been to protect her, perhaps...

It was a form of hope, but not necessarily for the best.

A guard strolled past her cell, a staser-rod hanging from his belt.

'Hi,' she called out. 'Any chance of an aspirin?'

The briefest of glances gave her the answer.

She wrenched her thoughts away from the whys and hows of her father's possible murder - especially the hows - to evaluate her stay in this city. It certainly hadn't been by choice: the military were once again playing her like a puppet. With typical cold precision, they had waited until *exactly* one year had passed since she left Jaiwan, when the stay-out-of-military-prison papers which General Lafayette had given her became useful only for origami. Then they had summoned her to Iglasia. It had been worded as a request - almost as an invitation - but the subtext was clear: come here and dance our dance, or we'll prosecute you like the deserter scum you truly are.

The dance in question, then what happened in the hotel foyer afterwards, had freaked her out. Hence her hitting the drink-dens of Iglasia's Old Town like a tornado.

'You want to experiment on me?'

Bernice had spat out the words like they were anchovies.

'We would love you to help us, Ms Summerfield. To be part of history.'

For a reputedly learned man, Dr Harmon Rancell had the face of a simpleton. He had languid, complacent eyes and a slack jaw. Yet the jowly old blob spoke with a clipped precision. The fact that his face was so divorced from the intellect which burned inside rated highly on the creep-o-meter.

She cast her eyes around his study without interest, save a couple of intriguing book spines. 'History, you say. What kind of historical event will this be? Filed alongside the Titanic, the Garten 3 floods and that awful Pruduccia bloodbath, perhaps?'

Dr Rancell closed her case file with a quiet slap. While she knew it was childish to do so, she couldn't help but find satisfaction in that file's width. Soon, they'd need another file altogether. Good.

'I am not in the business of disaster, Bernice,' said Rancell, his tongue coiling wetly around her name. 'I am in the business of progress. Learning more about the human condition.'

'Fascinating.' She shuffled in her seat. What was in store for her here? 'And what do you suspect you might learn from me?'

'Demons,' he said, making her shudder inwardly, hoping he hadn't noticed. 'I am studying people who feel unable to become... involved with the war. In order to learn why that might be.'

'What do demons have to do with my moral stance?'

'If you'll let me finish, Bernice... If we can identify common personal demons among objectors to military enlistment, then we can...' He drew in a deep, ragged breath. '... draw *conclusions*.'

Bernice's eyes wandered to the armed, impossibly tall guards who stood either side of the door's only exit. They returned her gaze, impassive.

She looked back at Rancell, as much as it pained her. His smirk was that of the butterfly collector, pin in hand.

'What's in this for me?'

'Avoiding another stretch of prison. You know this, Bernice.'

She sat upright and slapped her hands together.

'Right, then. Let the joy commence.'

right-hand man was much younger and taller: in his twenties by Bernice's reckoning. Introducing himself simply as Morton, he sported an endearing shock of mad-scientist hair, bright red at that. The guy was clearly embarrassed at having to lead her into a small bare-walled room and attach her wrists to the arms of what looked like an electric chair. He was cute, she mused. In a sexless kind of way.

'Why the straps?' she asked. 'For your jollies?'

Morton's face quickly began vying for the 'reddest attribute' gong.

'No, not at all,' he flustered. 'I_ I mean, I...'

'Forget it,' she sighed. 'Enjoy working here, do you?'

'I do, yes. We discover so much.'

'Ow! Not so tight, Morton.'

'Sorry about that,' he murmured, seeing to the offending strap.

'So what are you hoping to discover here?'

'I'll_ Er, I'll have to let Dr Rancell...'

Instinctively sensing Rancell presence, Morton moved to one side, revealing the doctor, flanked by those same guards.

advanced on Bernice, holding what appeared to be a pair of black sunshades. While the lenses looked normal enough, the arms were angled slightly upwards and ended in round sucker-like sensors.

'Thank you, Morton,' he said. 'Now just relax, Bernice.'

Rancell was clearly enjoying himself, all but drooling. 'I'm going to place these on your face, just like regular spectacles.'

As she'd suspected, the suckers ended up nowhere near her ears, instead clamping on to her temples - those pressure points

which always throbbed especially vigorously ten hours after a vodka frenzy.

Twin spasms jettied through her head. She reared up in the chair, as high as those straps would allow.

'Goddess! What the f-'

'Worry not,' said Rancell, placing his bone-dry hand on hers. It's just the docking process. That was the one and only smidgeon of pain, trust me.'

'Smidgeon? You must have a high pain threshold, Dr Rancid. I'd love to test it for you.'

'Thank you, Bernice. But the name's Rancell. And I'll pass. Now tell me: how do you feel about your parents? Good memories?'

She peered through the dark lenses at Rancell and his guards. Over to one side, Morton stood with his back against the wall. Even his silhouette exuded guilt. It made her uneasy.

'Yes, the best memories ever, thanks for asking,' she muttered. 'You a doctor *and* a shrink now? What am I going to see?'

Rancell's voice remained casual. 'You're not going to see anything. The glasses are going to see *you*. Deep inside. It's like archaeology, if you will. Digging for enlightenment. I was just trying to ascertain -'

'Do you have a spurious simile to match every patient's profession?'

'Please relax. Your pulse is a little high.'

'Strange. I feel perfectly calm. Look, just do it.'

Rancell waddled over to a box of flashing lights. One click, and the lights changed from being predominantly red to green.

'So what am I going to experience?'

Rancell was heading for the door, calling for Morton to follow. He did so, like a pup.

'Hey,' she called. 'What am I -'

She stopped when the room's door closed. Through the shades, she could dimly make out the shadowy guards.

'You seen this happen before, guys?' she asked.

No answer. Low humming from the box.

Then laughter. Rumbling laughter. Two different kinds.

The tall shadows were quivering. They thought her funny. Grinding her teeth, she just sat there, hands gripping the chair arms, tense, internalising the dread.

The humming rose in volume and pitch. Bernice felt sure her pulse was damn near sprinting now.

The door to the room opened again. She made out Dr Rancell's

familiar bulk approaching. He stood by the box. It clicked and the lights mainly reverted to red.

Moving over to Bernice, he eased first one, then the other sensor from her head. Removing the shades, he smiled down at her, as she blinked against the renewed strength of the overhead lights.

'All done,' he said. 'Thank you for taking part.'

Now accustomed to the light, her eyes blinked incredulously instead. 'Why did you leave the room?'

'The box emits low levels of radiation,' he shrugged, wiping some sweat off his forehead. 'I've been at a few of these tests most days, so...

As she followed Rancell from the room, Bernice couldn't resist a wink at the visibly disturbed guards.

This military research dome, all dull greys and greens, was located ten miles west of Iglasia and surrounded by dense jungle. Tharn was 43 per cent natural vegetation, although of course the planet had been 92 per cent before the first settlers arrived. On her way out of the facility, Bernice walked past the entire length of a huge glass-fronted water tank, empathising with the fish within: they looked depressed and trapped.

Dr Rancell's use of the word 'conclusions' echoed around her thoughts. Terrible how one word had the power to chill. Passing out through heavy-duty security gates, her rucksack already digging into her bare shoulders, she thought it grim that the dome should fester amid such tropical beauty.

She would be required to stay in Iglasia for the next week. Waiting. The military were taking care of her accommodation, at the exclusive Midian Heights hotel. Seven nights of luxury and distracted thumb-twiddling. On no account was she to leave Iglasia. Any pretence of her having freewill had dropped: she was being plain ordered around. She had even been fitted with a tracer - a tiny pink dot planted just under the skin of her left forearm - which would soon inform the military if she dared stray beyond Iglasia's city limits, or indeed tried to remove it. Her remarks about having a pink dot on her arm ('I'll never leave the house!') met zero response. That nano-surgeon had somehow managed to restrain his uproarious laughter.

As if she needed another reason for feeling uncomfortable about a stay on Tharn, there was the little matter of it being home to Ritchard D'Zar. The billionaire was rumoured to have taken out a contract on her life, after she'd beaten him to finding the Rosaria

Stone, on one of the Zerxes system's sea-planets. D'Zar had promised the gem to his latest wife and had been enraged by Bernice's victory. Many folk had warned her that when D'Zar lost, so were lives. Still, D'Zar lived a full continent away. Hopefully, the military basis of her trip would ensure that her presence remained covert.

She was shuttled into Iglasia within minutes, on the back seat of a slick lozenge-shaped tube which whizzed along a monorail, half a mile above ground. One of fifty passengers, she watched as the dome, topped by what looked like a circular observation deck, was quickly yanked out of sight. The view was spectacular, but dizzying. As Iglasia's clustered towers appeared on the horizon, they reminded her of Earth's Manhattan, with the climate of a Florida or a Garten 3. Sunlight glanced off the nearby Trayan Sea and collided with those towers, making them shimmer intensely. Iglasia was literally a blinder. Under different circumstances, she might have been delighted to visit.

The Midian Heights' foyer offered all the empty opulence she'd expected, replete with marble, serve-bots and crushed velvet. Fireflies flitted in orchestrated groups across the ceiling, in lieu of chandeliers: a set-up which initially dismayed Bernice. Fireflies should roam. During check-in, however, she couldn't help but stare at them and quickly realised that they were miniscule bots. Fair enough.

She barely clocked her expansive room - the vast mural of the Trayan stretching across the entirety of one wall, or even the complimentary rack of wine. She felt caged. This hotel room was where she was supposed to be, so she had to get out. She needed some bar-life. To vent rebellious steam. More than anything, she needed to shut out all thought of what Rancell's demon-catching device might have bagged.

Striding back across the foyer, Bernice could now make out the tiny, almost imperceptible metallic clicks those fireflies made when they collided. Then she saw her. No No Darmo.

Even worse than this, No No Darmo saw her.

Darmo was sitting across the foyer, wearing that familiar green catsuit and holding a glass into which a serve-bot was pouring wine. Her narrow eyes widened, predatorily. Her gills gaped open.

'Hi, Bernice,' she said. 'Ritchard's given me a message for you.'

Bernice immediately changed direction and launched into a sprint, heading for the automatic front doors.

Behind her, the wine glass smashed against a wall, staining it red. Then the bot was shoved to one side and Darmo too was running, with that legendary lop-sided gait.

As Bernice ran, the street air filling her lungs like treacle. The Midian Heights towered over one of Iglasia's main thoroughfares: the crowds were a blessing in terms of cover, but also slowed her down. She darted past people, moving as nimbly as fear allowed, knowing that Darmo was less graceful, if faster. Sure enough, behind her she could hear protestant yells as the hit-woman blundered her way through - and over - Iglasia's citizens.

The breath caught in Bernice's throat as a titanium throwing star whizzed past her right ear and imbedded itself into the upright wooden pole of a market stall. She ducked past a large rickshaw tethered to a four-legged mammal with horns, then used its cover to switch tack and strafe into a narrow alleyway. Thundering down its cobbles, she took a sharp right and then all the random turns she could see, the blood pounding in her head, cold sweat running riot across her back.

When her breathing finally returned to something like normal ten minutes later, her thoughts continued to race. Clearly, No No Darmo had been assigned to the job. This was bad news. Darmo might resemble a fish - there were always jokes about her being a cold-blooded killer - but she murdered with the casual instinct of a shark.

Bernice stayed where she was, sitting beside a garbage compressor for what felt like hours, keeping a careful eye out along the alleyway. Her stomach rolled at the thought of someone having arrived in Iglasia with the specific purpose of killing her. Eventually, the sun sank from the sky, replaced by twin violet moons which lent Iglasia a surreal, lavender twilight, diluted on the main streets by intensely white lamps. As she set off along the city's lesser-known pathways, threading her way through to the Old Town, Bernice was grateful for the night's cloak.

The first thing she did was buy a gun. Ignoring, as she did so, the incensed voices inside her. The dumb weapon felt strange and cold and hard, concealed against her left hip and loading those laser cartridges had made her hands shake. Still, if it came right down to it, she wanted at least a chance. Just one.

Then she drank. The initial vodka shot, in a tiny bar populated mainly by elderly market-holders, was to take the edge off her rampaging nerves. The next was because the first felt good. The next was because she wanted to forget about Dr Rancell's machine. The

next was just because. Then she lost count. No longer keeping one eye on the entrance, or even her back to the wall, Bernice raised a raucous toast to fate, raising various onlookers' bushy eyebrows in the process.

'If it's my time, it's my time,' she shrugged. 'Why worry about being bumped off by a fish, when you can drink like one instead?' Bamboozled faces moved blurrily-up and down in her field of vision, no doubt humouring her. But she didn't care. She was talking for her own benefit.

A scent wafted past. Made her nose twitch in recognition. Reminded her of her father. As it dispersed, she drank to him, without a toast. In truth, she had no idea what to say.

In the early hours of the morning, Bernice found a house on the Old Town's southernmost edge, by the docks, which was advertising for a lodger. She took the room, putting every ounce of effort into speaking coherently to the landlord whom she'd just woken with her insistent knocking.

The following afternoon, she packed her bag, paid up and picked another bar - again full of old folk. She ended up telling an octogenarian about the military experiment and how a killer was after her blood. So what? She was drunk and so was the white-haired gentleman with the red nose. He could barely remember which city he was in, let alone absorb the information she was telling him.

Or so she thought, until he stopped her mid-flow, raising a forefinger with a horrifically long nail. 'Why don'tcha get proteck-shun, from the mili-tree?' he slurred. 'Seems they nee-jer alive.'

'I've considered that,' she nodded. 'But I've never had a use for them. Never, in my life. And I'm not about to find one now. Don't wanna be any more indebted to them than I already am.'

She clinked her glass against his.

'Good point, though, sir. Well made. Now, do you have a knife of any description?'

'A... knife?' he said, looking ready to speed-hobble towards the exit. 'Well, yesh. A schmall one.'

Bernice was rolling up one sleeve. She pointed at a barely visible pink dot on her arm.

'Excellent,' she beamed. 'Just need to hack this little beggar out.'

The next few days in Iglasia's bars would forever be a shapeless mess, barely registered in her memory. Bernice began forgetting where her latest digs were. She would stumble out of the latest bar,

to what she believed to be her lodgings, only to be informed by a stropky landlord that she'd checked out two days ago.

Alcohol rendered her nightly surroundings a merry-go-round of half-blurred faces, tumblers and liquid. The night after she removed the pink dot, one hulking figure across the bar room started to look frighteningly familiar. Just as she started to get a fix on his face, though, he slipped out into the darkness.

One morning, she woke by the sea, tucked under a dry-docked boat, with the most disgusting taste in her mouth. Vague memories of multi-coloured cocktails filtered through her mind.

She had crawled from beneath the boat and felt sinews crack as she raised herself upright and stretched, the sun whipping her bleary eyes. Brushing herself down, she slapped one palm against something unfamiliar.

It was an envelope. Green.

She frowned. Plucked it from her shirt's breast pocket. Jabbed a forefinger inside and ripped it across.

Inside, a single piece of equally green paper bore a simple message, in scrawled but legible handwriting:

'Dear Ms Summerfield, I'm not one to slay for the sake of it. Hide no more: you're spared. Maybe next time, yes? Regards, No No Darmo.'

Bernice frowned a lot. Had D'Zar changed his mind? If so, why? She stuffed the message back into her pocket and traipsed along the dock, now feeling as confused as she did tipsy.

That afternoon, she chose a deserted bar and hunkered down again. She was no longer hiding from Darmo, but from the military. She really didn't want to know about the contents of the Rancell Report. She might harbour demons, but they were her demons, damn it. Not for anyone else's perusal.

'Are you demonic?' she asked a glass of something-or-other, aloud. 'Do you count as one of my brood?'

She shrugged and knocked it back. The rest of the day passed much like any other day in Iglasia, as she systematically drank the hangover out of her system. Until someone grabbed her arse and chuckled, 'Peachy!'

Then came her father's face.

The guard mooched back past the cell, offering not even a glance this time. Bernice realised she'd been staring at the credit chip for so long, it had become a blur. Much like her time in Iglasia.

She focused back on her cell. On the here and now, and what she was going to do next. Even when drunk, Bernice knew her own mind well enough to feel certain that she had imagined neither Isaac Summerfield's face, nor the word 'murder'.

Just as she'd begun flicking through the possibilities yet again, she heard huge, precision-machined doors opening, along the corridor.

A tall, uncomfortably thin man in military garb appeared, stony-faced and accompanied by prison guards. What looked like a laser-sword hung from his belt.

'There you are,' he said.

The man was General Hutchinson. Bernice had never heard of him, but he'd clearly heard of her. As he single-handedly escorted her from the police complex, hands cuffed behind her back, he spoke like she was a terrorist who he'd finally brought down.

'Ditching the dot was no use,' he smirked. 'People like you always come to ground.'

He reached over and ran a bony thumb over the scab on her forearm. 'All you did was mess yourself up. Well done.'

Bernice didn't even look at him. The street was narrowing. Up ahead, it broadened into a square, where a sleek black air-cruiser hovered, the air beneath hot and distorted. Two military men waited by it, sergeant and soldier, by the look of them. Their firearms were lowered with something approaching discretion, so as not to alarm the public.

She and Hutchinson passed a small bar. Just inside, an active holo-screen was broadcasting news.

'I saw my father, last night, on a screen,' she blurted. 'Isaac Summerfield. The Admiral. What's going on?'

'Oh, it's all going on, all right,' grumbled Hutchinson. 'We should've known better than to use a -'

Bernice waited for the rest. It didn't come.

That scent again. The scent from the bar...

She glanced at Hutchinson... or at least where she thought he'd be.

The top half of the General's body was protruding from an alleyway, face down on the ground. There was blood on the stone around his head.

'What the hell?' yelled the sergeant, from the square. 'Freeze, Summerfield!'

They levelled their pulse-rifles at her.

Bernice raised her hands. Looked back at the alleyway.

Something grabbed Hutchinson's hair and yanked him backwards into the alley. There was a hollow chime which Bernice had come to associate with the unsheathing of laser-swords.

'Come to us. Now. Run!' yelled the sergeant.

Hutchinson screamed - a terrible sound, which was abruptly cut short. Something hit the street behind her. People scattered, crying out in shock.

Bernice ran towards the soldiers, as fast as her tethered hands made possible. She didn't want to fall and be the next victim.

The sergeant jabbed a finger at his subordinate. 'Get her in the cruiser. Now!'

Bernice found herself being half-dragged towards the vehicle.

'What the hell got Hutch?' said the soldier, voice wavering.

'No idea,' said the sergeant. 'Must be a friend of this bitch. We'll bring him in, or preferably take him down. Get ready. He's coming.'

Bernice tried to turn and look back, but the cruiser door opened and she was brutally shoved inside. The door slammed shut. She exchanged looks with the pilot. They were both facing in the opposite direction to whatever was going on.

'Hold it right there!' yelled the sergeant.

Pause.

The sergeant again. 'Stop walking, or those will be your last steps.'

Silent seconds crawled.

Two pulse-bursts sounded. That unmistakably sibilant whoosh.

Bernice noticed the young female pilot studying a wing mirror. She tried to do the same, on the other side. As a result of straining her face against the glass, she could just see the sergeant and his soldier taking a couple of steps back as a tall humanoid figure gained ground on them. Fast.

'What's going on?' the younger man shouted. 'Are these practice rounds?'

'Fire again!'

Then the sergeant was roaring in agony. Bernice saw the younger man's face, shocked, as blood sprayed him. He took two steps back, aimed and fired. Then he broke into a run, towards the cruiser.

Bernice turned to the pilot, whose face was taut with anxiety.

The soldier cried out behind them, terrified. Then nothing.

The pilot took another quick look in the mirror, then clearly wished she hadn't. It's coming. We're out of here.'

She engaged the joystick. The cruiser rose with a grace belying the situation's urgency. Bernice peered downwards, back onto the

square, but everything directly beneath them was blurred by the thrusters. She could only see the outline of something big. Head cocked back. Looking straight up at them.

Urban landscape swiftly gave way to green and the dome sprang into view. It was a short journey, but endless thoughts pummelled Bernice. Adrenalin had long since wiped any lingering trace of hangover.

Had that been Darmo, back there? But she no longer wanted to kill Bernice, for some reason. Was the hitwoman suddenly afraid that Bernice might shop her to the military, before she could leave Iglasia? No. It couldn't have been Darmo: she was shorter than that. Besides, pulse-rifles would have rendered her crispy cod.

The pilot refused to engage in conversation with Bernice during the flight. In fact, the woman held a knife in one hand throughout the journey, her knuckles distinctly white. Bernice felt flattered.

Those moons were quietly asserting dominion as the cruiser swooped on the discreetly lit dome. A landing pad sat beside it, in a clearing for which two hundred trees had probably suffered. The cruiser settled with pinprick accuracy, barely ruffling leaves. The party of five soldiers waiting to escort Bernice were more volatile. Pointless yells of 'Move!' rang out and rifle butts prodded her back, even though she was walking towards the dome as fast as she humanly could. Clearly, these men had already heard about their buddies meeting the business end of a laser-sword and assumed her somehow responsible. Out of respect for their grief, she let the verbal and physical abuse wash off. Something told her that there was much worse to come: especially if that killing machine back in Iglasia caught up with her.

He strode through the jungle as though it was an open plain. The laser-sword buzzed and throbbed in his hand, the lethal green light a blur as it whistled through the humidity.

Trees fell in all directions, unleashing great death knells as they did so. One second of crackling agony for every hundred years of their existence. He side-stepped most with ease: the rest he swatted aside, like an irritation.

He had watched the cruiser head off back to the dome and was moving in exactly the same direction.

He powered the sword across another wide trunk, up-ending the tree in a matter of seconds. The- noise resembled a thunderclap.

Splintered bark and green lifeblood filled the air. Irrelevant to him. All that mattered was his target.

He would be at the dome in a matter of minutes. Even though the cruiser had given him a pointer, he really hadn't needed it.

After all, he'd been there before.

He would find her.

Finding his path momentarily blocked, he unleashed a fearsome roar which seemed to shake the entire jungle, then swung the laser-sword again.

He would *find* her. Nothing and no one would stop him.

'No,' said Bernice. 'You sit down, Doctor. I'll stand if you don't mind, because I'll be asking the questions.'

Rancell's jaw hung even lower than usual. He didn't obey and sit, but his whole demeanour had altered: shoulders bowed, eyes ringed with black. He looked haunted. And if Rancell was testament to how much a few days could change a man, Morton looked positively traumatised.

She was sadly unable to point accusingly, because the cuffs were still behind her back. 'Something's gone wrong here, yes? And because I've been brought to you, and the pair of you look like shit, I'm guessing it's to do with your little experiment. Answers. Now.'

She was back in Rancell's study - this time surrounded by soldiers. One jabbed her squarely between the shoulder blades. She winced. His voice came like a bulldog's: 'You'll address the doctor in the -'

Rancell grimaced and waved the soldier off. He grabbed the back of his chair and his shoulders sunk even lower. He exhaled heavily.

'Bernice, the experiment aimed to make people face their demons. I mean, literally face their fears. Turn them into reality, using Prime Five energy. Those spectacles looked into the darkest recesses of your mind and pulled something out, which we then actually created in a security cell.'

Unable to settle on any words, Bernice shook her head in contempt.

'On the seventh day afterwards,' continued Morton, as if his delivering the really bad news might sweeten the pill, 'we were going to bring you back and put you in an adjoining room with a window between you and... him. See, the idea was -'

'Between me and... him?' repeated Bernice, neurons pinballing. For some reason, her knees were now made of rubber.

'Didn't you see him, when he attacked, earlier?' frowned Rancell. His eyes bulged in surprise. 'Perhaps you're in denial.'

'Saw who?' she barked, even though she rather felt she knew and didn't want the answer.

'He escaped from our enclosure,' murmured Rancell, with just a hint of apology. He stabbed a remote control button. A screen lit up behind him. Jerky high-res footage began: it was Bernice. Running out of a narrow road into a square towards the cam, hands cuffed behind her back.

'From Sergeant Vooma's helmet-cam,' noted Morton.

On the soundtrack, off-screen, Vooma barked orders.

Bernice's mouth and throat ran parchment-dry as the seven-foot muscle-machine walked onto the square, a green strip of light hanging by his side.

For the second time that week, she saw her father's face.

Two sentries up on the dome's observation platform had noticed what was happening to the jungle only a minute earlier. They had come to assume that no one cared about this research post enough to attack. So the sight of the green canopy collapsing as someone or something approached took time to register.

'Is that really happening?' breathed one.

The other nodded slowly, raising a coms handset to her mouth.

At ground level, near the landing area, guards could feel the earth tremor, throwing them off-balance. Word from the observation post only confirmed their worst fears. Something wicked their way stomped.

'Get ready,' yelled the ground commander, pointing towards the trees. 'They say it's almost here.' He listened to comms some more, then re-addressed his men: 'Correction. It's here. Get -'

Before the commander could finish, the trees beside him were wrenched apart like curtains. A green arc descended upon him.

The guards watched their commander die. Then opened fire.

Bernice ran to the window of Rancell's study and looked down.

All she could do was look. The sight of her father, literally larger than life, dressed in military garb and yet invading a military establishment, cutting men to pieces as pulse-bursts hammered through the air towards him... it made her feel like an ice sculpture, with only the shallow pulse of her heart to qualify her as human.

'Bernice,' said Rancell, appearing beside her, taking in the carnage.

'Listen to me. We need to know what attributes you've dreamt up for

this version of your father. What he's trying to achieve. For instance, why did he kill Ritchard D'Zar?'

Bernice slowly turned to RanceII. 'He did *what?*'

'Murdered the millionaire, Ritchard D'Zar, in Gwark. You know of him?'

Bernice didn't know what to say. How to react.

Down below, pulse-bursts pumped into what looked like her father's chest, barely making him waver. He swung the laser-sword, dispatching yet another grunt. Bernice's stomach clenched like a fist. She slapped a hand over her mouth.

'This version of your father was caught on security cam, marching out of D'Zar's mansion. It made the news.'

No No Darmo's abrupt change of heart, her letter on the docks: it was finally making sense, but only somewhere in a back room of Bernice's brain. Right now, her priorities lay with watching her Admiral Isaac Summerfield avatar striding across a field of dead men, towards the air-cruiser. Sheathing his laser-sword, he grabbed the vehicle's tail.

He began to swing it across the grass. Dug his heels into the dirt and curled into a spin, like a shot-putter, the cruiser's body swinging through the air, faster and faster.

Then he let go, with a roar so loud it felt like he was standing next to her.

'Get back,' she shrilled, charging away from the window. If her hands had been free, she would have yanked RanceII with her. As it was, she was forced to dive as far across the man's study as possible, landing on two soldiers and propelling them several feet backwards.

The three of them landed heavily against the opposite wall, books cascading around them. Bernice twisted around, looking back despite herself.

For a split second, she saw RanceII's silhouette against the window. This was replaced, in a deafening instant, by the cruiser, as it hammered into the room. Flying glass and metal lashed the walls. Red hot pain lanced through Bernice's right calf. Someone roughly pulled her through the open doorway, urging her to move fast.

It was Morton. He was shouting at a grunt, asking for a key for Bernice's cuffs. When he was ignored, he steered her out of the corridor into a small, dimly lit laboratory. Quickly scanning the shelves, he found and activated a probe. A red hot glow appeared at its tip.

'Turn around,' he said.

'Ow,' she winced, as she did so. 'There's something in my leg. Piece of cruiser, I think.'

'Let's get you out of these cuffs, first. Hold still.'

'Oh, so you *can* be assertive,' she breathed, wrists feeling warm. 'Now listen. D'Zar. My father - can't believe I'm calling him that - must have known that D'Zar had a contract out on me.' There was now a real heat between her hands. She concentrated on holding still. 'But how? I didn't know for sure until after the first phase of Rancell's experiment.'

'My experiment,' said Morton, quietly. 'It's *my* experiment, not Rancell's:

'What?'

'Rancell's a decoy. If someone wants to sabotage my work, they'll target the monkey, not the organ-grinder. Rancell is - *was* - an unemployed actor. Anyway, that's unimportant. Those specs injected tiny implants into your brain, establishing a one-way psychic link with your Prime Five father. That's how he knew. You were also the first Prime Five subject - previous experiments used -'

'Prime Four?' Her voice was cold. Even.

'hope, 4.5. But Prime Five clearly makes demons far *beyond* real. Or perhaps you're more intensely disturbed than most subjects. Either way, we found a limit. Now, you need to know about the reductive phase.'

Chink! The tightness between Bernice's cuffs disappeared. She brought her hands back out in front of her, the metal rings like bracelets on her wrists.

She turned and stared hard at Morton. Tiny muscles pulsed on either side of her jaw.

'So *you're* the bastard who made me bring a mockery of my father into the world.'

He shrugged, almost looking hurt. 'Mockery? I imagine it's rather a combination of an idealistic view of your father, and the barbarian who you fear he was all along. Ringing bells?'

She brought her fist crashing up into his chin. Mouth bloodied, Morton staggered back against a bench, then slumped to the floor, where he stayed.

Barely giving him a glance, Bernice reached down and yanked a jagged metal panel from her leg. She swore the pain away, then slipped back out into the corridor.

*

The effect was like walking into a wind tunnel. Almost as if they'd been waiting outside for her, two running soldiers grabbed her by the arms, lifting her feet off the floor by virtue of their height. She recognised them immediately as the radioactive laughing-boys from Rancell's experiment.

'Hey,' she bristled, feet kicking. 'Let me down.'

'The intruder's in the building,' said one.

'Climbed right up the dome and in through the compromised area.'

'Compromised area,' sighed Bernice. 'It's a hole. Now put me down.'

'We need to take you out of harm's way.'

'It's my *father*.'

Beyond a set of double doors, she found herself being carried upstairs.

'Why are we going up, not down?'

'The intruder flooded the ground floor. Rammed a laser-sword down through the ceiling. Compromised a water tank'.

Clearly, he knew about this tank, because she had seen it. Guilt flooded through her: the Prime Five Isaac Summerfield was her doing. He seemed to be acting in what appeared to be her best interests. Oh, dear Goddess.

The soldiers kicked open another set of double doors. More stairs beckoned.

'I'm serious. Put me down. Or you'll really wish you had.'

'Can't do that, ma'am,' came their chorus.

Swinging her feet forwards, she widened them on the way back, crashing her heels into the men's groins. Her arms were immediately released as pained gasps wheezed out in perfect stereo.

'Wishing now?' she snapped, heading back the way she came. Crashing headlong through the double doors, she found herself back at the stairwell.

'Bernice!'

The voice boomed from below, bouncing around the confined space. Chills cascaded through her nervous system.

She peered over the railing, to see her father climbing up the centre of the stairs, equal parts guerrilla and gorilla. He was grinning.

'Stay put,' he said. 'I'm coming to get you.'

Bernice stared dumbly down as he got closer, only managing a couple of steps back as he hauled himself over the edge, not even vaguely breathless. He was armed to the teeth with laser-swords, pulse-weaponry and grenades. He reeked of blood, sweat and

scorched earth - yet through it all, she could detect that scent. The toughest weapon of all: a real nostalgia-bomb.

'Gotcha,' he chuckled, square jaw pulsing. 'Now, let's get you out of here, eh?'

Bernice opened her mouth, a thousand phrases fighting for attention. The winner turned out to be a meek, 'Okay. She swallowed hard, as he firmly grabbed her hand, leading her through a set of doors and along another corridor.

'Just don't kill any more people,' she managed, as the tramping of boots registered up ahead. 'Please.'

'Why stop now?' he wondered aloud, raising the kind of father-knows-best eyebrow which had instigated so many of her toddler tantrums. 'You wanted the others dead.'

'No, I didn't. I really -'

'Some dark part of your mind obviously did, honey, or I wouldn't have picked up on those thoughts. I'm aware of what I am, Bernice. A mirror. I now know this, because Morton told you. Oh, and talking of Morton...'

He swung a thick arm behind his back, unhooking and retrieving something.

Bernice stopped in her tracks, mouth agape, when she saw it was Morton's severed head.

As her father stopped a few paces ahead, she saw another head swinging from his belt, attached by the hair. It had once belonged to No No Darmo.

'You wanted this, baby-girl,' he protested, seeing her wet eyes, but most of all feeling her psychic shockwaves. 'So sorry if I've upset you.'

He reached out for her. She slapped the hand away.

'I didn't want anyone dead. Look, just forget about the dark parts of my mind. Focus on my sensible conscious thoughts. Darmo spared me.'

'She said, "Maybe next time", remember? You'd have met her again, no question.' Folding arms, he drummed fingers, reminding Bernice that he was her very own Frankenstein.

'This is what you are, isn't it? Or were. A killer. You killed people for a living.'

I fought the Enemy, Benny. The Enemy aren't people. I saved cities. Entire species.'

'Yes, but if not the Enemy, you'd be killing someone else. That's your job, right? Hey. you almost killed me with that air-cruiser.'

'Sorry again. I'm modelled on Isaac Summerfield, see? He made mistakes.'

Cocking an ear, he aimed a pulse-rifle along the corridor. Held one finger to his lips. 'Sssh.'

A troop of soldiers ran into the red 'X' on his electronic viewfinder.

Summoning all her strength, Bernice knocked his arm upwards, sending a pulse-burst skittering along the ceiling and destroying the lights. The corridor fell black. She felt her father's hands on her back and shoulders, pushing her against the left-hand wall, just as gunfire broke out, rendering the corridor strobe-lit.

'It's us or them now,' she heard him mutter. Goddess, even the *smell* of him ignited long-buried memory patterns.

Then he was off-loading shards of grim green light through the darkness, making men scream. Bernice clung to her father's impossibly broad back, knowing that her life really did depend on it, as mayhem reigned.

Someone began yelling commands from the opposite direction. Hearing this immediately, her father hustled her through side doors.

'The roof,' he said, as they charged up yet more stairs in unison, pulse-bursts scorching the ground behind them, and walls ahead.

What was she doing? She was running into certain death, alongside a mass of Prime Five energy modelled on her dead dad. Truly insane.

Yet on she went. Blood molten. Lungs hoarse.

Two pulls of his trigger were all it took to clear the observation desk, despite Bernice's horrified protest. As they ran out onto the floodlit surface, she tried not to look at the aftermath, glancing instead at the black expanse of jungle and Iglasia twinkling on the horizon.

One level down from this deck, a circular walkway was swiftly becoming populated with grunts. There were the unmistakable clunks of pulse-rifles being primed. The pair of them were in full view.

'This has to stop,' she said, wrenching his arm, making him face her. 'You don't seem to die. So there'll be more killing. A massacre. Please stop. Listen to me: *I do not want this.*'

He gazed into her eyes - a moment punctuated by more clunks from below - as if seeking confirmation. Then he nodded.

'All right. I'm calm. For now. Let's concentrate on getting out of here, before the red mist comes back.'

He placed a pulse-rifle's nozzle against her forehead. She didn't flinch.

'Drop your weapons,' he yelled, downwards. 'Or she's history. And you'll never know why your experiment screwed up so badly.'

A lengthy pause.

Down below, someone told the grunts to comply.

The widespread clattering of metal against stone.

'What do you want?' yelled someone officious.

'To take my daughter away from all this. I'm *your* mistake, not hers. Do not try to stop us.'

His gaze softened as he returned it to her. 'Now come here,' he said, pulling her towards him.

'What?' she whispered. 'Why?'

'Because you need it.'

Below, the officious face was saying something, but it sounded a million miles away.

Suddenly, she was in her father's arms, the side of her face pressed somewhere between his chest and stomach, his scent overwhelming. Her eyes glistened in preparation for what she knew was coming.

'I'm your Daddy,' he said, softly. 'I'm your Daddy, Bernice, and I'm here for you. I love you. Now and forever.'

With a tear riding each cheek, she managed to get the words out. 'Thanks, Dad. Even though they were my lines, you delivered them well.'

He squeezed her so hard, she fully expected to hear something crack inside her. It would have been worth it.

'Good,' he said. 'I'm glad. Now, time to fly away from here.'

She exhaled as his grip relaxed. Looked up at him, questioning.

'Fly?'

'Yes. I can fly. Prime Five energy floats.'

'Then why didn't you fly here?'

'Because the real Isaac Summerfield couldn't. Still, these are mitigating circumstances. Now climb on my back. You're still looking sceptical, but I'm telling you, I can fly.'

She gazed at him for a while.

'If you say you can fly, Dad, then I believe you.'

He returned her smile. Then he winked, turned and stooped.

Hours later, all she could think about were those last moments. Everything else felt like a blur of bad coffee, questioning and endless reassurances that she wouldn't be blamed for the massacre, provided she didn't tell anyone about it.

She had climbed onto the facsimile of Admiral Isaac Summerfield

with her last vestiges of strength, ultimately riding high on his back. Below, there was debate among soldiers and superiors: should they let this freak take her away?

She had stared out into the night, somewhere between those beautiful moons, and felt alive with anticipation.

Then she had waited. And waited.

'What's going on, Dad?' she finally said.

His head turned a few degrees in her favour, with the slow creak of a statue coming to life. A faded eye came into view, peering around at her.

'The reductive phase,' he said, voice like broken leather. 'Morton was telling you...'

'Yes... What did he mean? What's wrong?'

'Pretty sure I'm feeling it. Time's up. Breaking...'

Bernice suddenly lowered a few feet, as he gave way beneath her. She was left sitting on her father's upper torso. Everything else had crumbled into what looked like small pieces of marble.

'... down,' he croaked, a split-second before the rest of him fell apart. Bernice tumbled forwards, until she was sprawled on a pile of warm stone chips and cold weaponry.

She raised herself into a sitting position. Suddenly numb, she watched expressionless as the chips dissolved into grey liquid with a slow hiss. Then they ebbed away entirely.

'Oh, look, Dad,' she whispered. 'You've done it ag-'

That last word refused to leave the gullet. Her shoulders were shaking too violently.

It was a full hour before anyone dared approach this broken figure: partly because of the grenades held so tightly in each of her hands.

Home

Peter Darvill-Evans

**In the matter of EarthGovExec v
Galaxy RealTime™ Holovid
Corporation**

**The charge being the imperilment of
human and other sentient life in the
pursuance of the production of
motion picture entertainments.**

**Exhibit 23A (being a transcript of
Exhibit 23, a holovid produced,
broadcast and otherwise distributed
by the defendant).**

SPACE. STARS. FORWARD MOVEMENT.

Music: Lateran's 4th symphony, 2nd (slow) movement, bass augmented.

APPROACHING A YELLOW STAR NEAR THE CENTRE OF THE STAR FIELD. ITS BRIGHTNESS FLARES AS IT GROWS IN SIZE. SWOOP BETWEEN THE ORBITS OF ITS PLANETS.

**Caption (sub-title): Galaxy RealTime™' Holovid Corporation
EARTH. THE BLUE PLANET, WREATHED IN CLOUDS, GLITTERING IN THE LIGHT OF THE SUN.**

**Caption (sub-title) (smaller typeface): and the Bakalov Institute for Historical Research present
AN ARC OF GREY HORIZON. PULL AWAY. JAGGED PEAKS AND BLACK-SHADOWED PITS. LIFELESS LANDSCAPE. EARTH'S MOON.**

Music: stop. Sound FX: bass drone.

**Caption (title): FIRST STEP
MOVING FORWARD ACROSS THE ROCK-STREWN PLAIN. TOWARDS A CREST, AND UP ITS FACE. A PAUSE AT THE SUMMIT. PAN SHOT: THE INTERIOR OF A VAST CRATER. AMONG THE RANDOM IRREGULARITY OF PITS AND BOULDERS, A PERFECT HEMISPHERE. ZOOM IN: A GREY DOME PLANTED IN THE GREY DUST.**

**Caption (sub-title): The rediscovery of the first moon base
PICTURE SLOW FADE.**

Music: RealTime™ sig tune.

Caption (sub-title): presented by

Music: segue into Delightly sig tune; crescendo; slow diminuendo.

**Caption (title): Angel Delightly
CLOSE-UP: ANGEL DELIGHTLY'S FACE BEHIND DARKENED GLASS. SHE SMILES AND WIDENS HER EYES. HER TEETH ARE VERY WHITE AND EVEN. HER IRISES ARE CORNFLOWER-BLUE.**

**ANGEL (voice distorted as though heard on radio): Hello.
And welcome to a very special real-time report.**

PULL BACK. ANGEL IS INSIDE AN OLD-FASHIONED SPACE SUIT. WITH CLUMSY GLOVED HANDS SHE LIFTS OFF THE HELMET. SHE SHAKES HER LONG BLONDE HAIR.

ANGEL I'm going to Earth's moon. But unlike the brave pioneers of rocket-powered exploration, I won't have to wear anything like this.

ANGEL WRIGGLES AND THE SUIT COLLAPSES FORWARDS, REVEALING THAT ANGEL IS DRESSED IN A SHIMMERING GOWN OF DARING DESIGN, EXQUISITE TAILORING, AND INCANDESCENT COLOUR. A CAMERA THE SIZE OF A HUMMING-BIRD IS HOVERING BESIDE HER HEAD.

ANGEL Planet Earth has only one moon, and apart from its dubious reputation as a prison - and we'll hear more about that later - it has been largely forgotten even by the people in whose night sky it shines. So why have archaeologists and science historians - funded by the Galaxy RealTime Holovid Corporation - been at work there for the past three Earth weeks? Their mission has been to preserve the remains of the first base ever built by humans on another world. Their work is now over, and I'm going to meet the team's leader and take a look at some of the weird and wonderful antiquities from the twenty-first century. My receiver and a camera have already been matted to the interior of the research dome - so I'm ready to go.

WITH A WIDE SMILE AND A FLOURISH OF A RED-TIPPED FINGER, ANGEL PRESSES AN EQUALLY RED BUTTON ON THE CONSOLE BESIDE HER.

Music: Delightly sig tune.

FADE TO BLACK. FADE UP IMAGE FROM DELIGHTLY HEAD-CAM: LUNAR SURFACE, GREY DUST, ROCKS, ALL WITHIN AND BENEATH AN UMBRELLA OF GREY SKY. IN THE DUST ARE THE FOOTPRINTS OF BUILDINGS AND TRACKS OF VEHICLES. MUSIC: FADE TO STOP. ZOOM IN TO THE FEW REMAINING STRUCTURES. MOST OF THEM APPEAR INDUSTRIAL IN SCALE AND NATURE: PLANT AND MACHINERY SET IN FRAMEWORKS OF GIRDERS.

ANGEL And here I am, inside the research dome. Let's meet the team leader. As you can see, most of the temporary buildings have already been taken away. But the site office is still here. Hello! Anyone home?

ADVANCE TOWARDS ONE OF THE STRUCTURES. ITS DOOR OPENS. ZOOM IN: A TALL YOUNG WOMAN WITH SHORT, DARK, TOUSLED HAIR.

WOMAN **Who...? Oh. Damnation. Is it that time already? You must be, er, Delightly.**

ANGEL **Call me Angel.**

WOMAN **Um - okay, perhaps. Bernice Summerfield, archaeologist. The lonely last representative of the intrepid band of muckrakers who were press-ganged into sorting through the crap abandoned by our ancestors on this godforsaken rock. Call me Benny. This is going to be edited before it goes out, right?**

ANGEL **No, it's live. That's why it's called a real-time report. Didn't you read your contract?**

BENNY **Not every syllable.**

BENNY LOOKS AT ANGEL; GLANCES FROM SIDE TO SIDE; SIGHS; LOOKS AT ANGEL AGAIN.

BENNY **I suppose awkward silences don't make for great entertainment. Well, let's get on with it. What would you like to see?**

ANGEL **Everything. It's so exciting. I'm about to see the relics left by the first explorers to set up a base on another world. It's so hard for us today to imagine everyone living on just one small planet. By the way, do you always wear those clothes, or have you dressed up to fit into the twenty-first-century theme?**

SCAN BENNY FROM DUSTY HAIR TO SCUFFED BOOTS, BY WAY OF T-SHIRT AND JEANS.

BENNY **It's a dirty job. Denim wears well. Do you always dress like a space-station tart on a night out with a particularly wealthy client?**

ANGEL **Ha ha ha! I can see we're going to get on. Same sense of humour. What's that in your pocket?**

BENNY **Trowel. The one essential tool of the jobbing digger. Little used on this expedition, however.**

ANGEL **You're an archaeologist, aren't you?**

BENNY **Indeed I am. I believe I may have mentioned the fact less than two minutes ago.**

ANGEL **A jobbing digger. I'm beginning to suspect you're not the team leader.**

BENNY **Very astute. The team leader, Professor Rakmussen, is three times my age and of a different gender, so in practice we're rarely mistaken for each other. Congratulations on being one of the very few to accomplish the feat. The professor is by now, I should think, back at his university in Helsinki.**

ANGEL **Bernice. I surely don't have to remind you that this vidcast is being watched by three billion people and will reach an eventual audience of more than five hundred billion. I was told the team leader would be here to speak to us. His failure to abide by the terms of his agreement and leave in his place a, a -**

BENNY **A jobbing digger.**

ANGEL **Thank you. Is not only a breach of contract but displays contempt for the billions of people who, indirectly, paid for him to be here.**

PAN ACROSS THE HORIZON, WHERE THE GREY OF THE INTERIOR SURFACE OF THE DOME MEETS THE GREY HIGHLIGHTS AND BLACK SHADOWS OF THE CRATER FLOOR. UP: SURVEY THE FEATURELESS GREY HEMISPHERE OF THE DOME, A BRIGHTER PATCH INDICATING THE DIRECTION OF THE SUN. RETURN: BENNY HAS HER HANDS RAISED, PALMS OUTWARD.

BENNY **Look, I'm sorry. It's, um, well, it's my fault, partly. I sort of volunteered to stay on and wait for the dismantling crew to turn up. The prof was keen to get back home whereas in my case - well, I'm in no hurry. I could do with staying off Earth for another few days, you see. For, er, personal reasons. What with all the packing and last-minute recording and cataloguing I think we both forgot about the vidcast. Absent-minded academics, eh? Anyway, there's nothing for it. We'll just have to make the best of things. I promise to**

be helpful, informative and polite, even though I'd rather be having rocks dropped on my head. It's a situation in which we both have to make sacrifices. Deal?

BENNY LIFTS HER EYEBROWS EVEN FURTHER AND SHAPES HER LIPS INTO A SMILE.

ANGEL (Sighs) Very well. The show must go on, and all that. But I can promise you that we'll review Rakmussen's appearance fee. And before you ask, no, you won't get it. Now: what's in here?

FOCUS AND ZOOM PAST BENNY; THROUGH THE DOOR AND INTO THE STRUCTURE. BASINS, TAPS, MIRRORS, LOCKERS, CUBICLES.

BENNY That's the washroom. You won't find any twenty-first-century artefacts in there.

AT THE END OF A ROW OF BASINS, LYING ON THE WHITE SURFACE, AN OBJECT. ZOOM IN: IT'S AN OLD-FASHIONED BOOK, MADE OF PAPER LEAVES HELD TOGETHER WITH A SPIRAL OF WIRE. ANGEL'S HAND PICKS IT UP.

ANGEL Then what's this?

FOREGROUND: THE BOOK. BACKGROUND: BENNY, FRAMED IN THE DOORWAY.

BENNY Oh, that. It's a twenty-first-century artefact. It's a notebook in which Houston McKenzie kept a sort of diary. We found it in the base. I think he left it there on purpose.

ANGEL Houston McKenzie?

BENNY Did you do any research for this show? McKenzie was in charge of the landing crew - the men and women who stayed in the base.

ANGEL And is the washroom an appropriate place to keep his notebook, do you think?

BENNY I've been reading it. There's not much to do now until the ship arrives. And he wanted it to be read by someone. He was a thoughtful man.

ANGEL'S RED-NAILED FINGERS OPEN THE BOOK. THE PAGES ARE WHITE, AND MARKED WITH FAINT, HORIZONTAL LINES. BETWEEN, AND SOMETIMES ACROSS, THE LINES THERE IS MANUAL SCRIPT AND THE OCCASIONAL ROUGH SKETCH.

ANGEL I can't make out the words.

BENNY It's twenty-first-century English. But it can be difficult to read if you're not used to handwriting. Allow me.

BENNY'S HANDS TAKE THE BOOK FROM ANGEL'S. PULL BACK. BENNY'S FACE, FROWNING IN CONCENTRATION.

BENNY This is how it starts. '*Venturer's* gone. I've just watched the exhaust flare fade into the blackness of space. In a little under two hours Jean-Marc and his people will be back on Space Station 3. And the six of us are completely alone. Marooned, on a big, round desert island. I know we've got every kind of radio set-up you can imagine, and back-up systems on the back-up systems, and if something goes wrong *Venturer* can be back here in a couple of hours. But I look up at that big blue ball and it sure feels a long way back to Clarksville.'

ANGEL Clarksville?

BENNY It was a town in North America. It's under the Mississippi Sea now. It's where McKenzie was born, according to Earthnet. But the records from that era are unreliable. I would have said that McKenzie was a Scottish name. On the other hand, there was much more migration on Earth in the time of the nation-states than is commonly believed, you know. I've found an abstract of an article citing nineteenth-century sources -

ANGEL That's an interesting point. But I'm sure our viewers would like to see the rest of the site.

ZOOM TOWARDS THE DOOR. BENNY STEPS BACKWARDS THROUGH IT. FOCUS PAST HER, ON THE GREY SURFACE BENEATH THE GREY DOME.

BENNY **Well, there's not a lot left, as you can see. The accommodation units and the workrooms have all been taken away, along with pretty much all of the equipment.**

STANDING AGAINST A BACKGROUND OF THE CRATER'S CREST, BENNY INDICATES WITH HER RIGHT ARM. ZOOM TOWARDS EACH STRUCTURE AS SHE MENTIONS IT.

BENNY **Washroom: you've already explored it. Site office: comms links, data store, processor, big comfy leather chair. Then field maintenance: you can see the units for the radiation barrier, the atmosphere recycling plant, the gravity generator, the energy field generator. Next along, it's all the same things again - back-ups. The heavy machinery: that's the valuable stuff. That's what the ship's coming back for.**

CLOSE-UP ON ONE OF THE STRUCTURES: A METAL CUBE, SPROUTING AN EFFLORESCENCE OF POLISHED DUCTS, HELD WITHIN A WEB OF STEEL JOISTS AND UPRIGHTS.

ANGEL **Those things don't look as though they'll be easy to dismantle.**

BENNY **The girders are fused to the bedrock. It seems a little excessive to me, but I suppose we want our life-support systems to be stable. But the recycling plants and so forth will just lift out of the cradles. We'll leave the frameworks behind. Couldn't shift them anyway.**

SCAN THE PERIMETER OF THE INTERIOR OF THE DOME.

ANGEL **Where are the field generators for the original base? They must have been big and primitive.**

BENNY **No generators. No energy field: the base was a physical structure, not an energy bubble like this. No gravity generator: McKenzie and his team wore weighted boots. If they'd**

stayed too long their muscles would have wasted. And precious little radiation protection. It wasn't exactly a holiday. They stayed for three months: by that time two of them were falling ill and the others were gently going crazy. It was ten years before anyone suggested trying again.

ANGEL It was a hostile environment.

BENNY Still is. But you don't have to worry: you're a hologram. I'm really here and if the energy field fails I'll die of haemorrhage, asphyxiation, exposure and radiation sickness, in that order. If in an incoming meteorite doesn't get me first.

SILENCE. SCAN THE SMOOTH, TRANSLUCENT, GREY CURVE OF THE ENERGY FIELD.

ANGEL Not a pleasant thought. Thank goodness we're living in more civilised times.

BENNY I do so agree. For example, I'm told that these days your Earthgov doesn't waste time trying to rehabilitate hardened criminals: it just sends them here.

ANGEL We try not to let politics intrude into a Galaxy Corporation real-time holoivid report, Benny. Let's stick to the subject: if the original base was a physical structure, where is it? It's what we've come all this way to see.

BENNY LOOKS PUZZLED. SHE GESTURES TOWARDS THE LINE OF STRUCTURES.

BENNY It's right there. It's not trying to be inconspicuous.

ZOOM IN ON THE STRUCTURES. SCAN PAST THE WASHROOM, THE SITE OFFICE, THE VARIOUS GENERATORS IN THEIR MASSIVE METAL WEBS. STOP. ZOOM AGAIN, GREATER MAGNIFICATION. DWARFED BETWEEN THE TALL CYLINDERS OF AN ATMOSPHERE RECYCLER AND THE BLACK BULK OF AN ELECTRICITY TRANSFORMER THERE IS A GEODESIC DOME NO MORE THAN 15 METRES HIGH.

ANGEL

That's it?

BENNY

That's it. It's a little bigger than it looks: there's a big square extension at the back that houses the air and water recyclers. And there was a second extension that's now missing - it must have been used to carry equipment back to the space station when the mission ended. Come and have a look.

MOVING TOWARDS THE HEMISPHERE OF POLYHEDRONS. CUT BETWEEN IT AND BENNY, TALKING AS SHE WALKS, HER FACE ANIMATED, HER BOOTS SCUFFING THROUGH THE GREY DUST.

BENNY

It's a miracle of design. Every square centimetre of the surface is covered with photovoltaic cells: hopelessly inefficient, but the best source of solar power they had. You can see that the plates have been damaged by meteorite strikes, but some of the cells still produce power. It's been here for five centuries, and with a bit of renovation it could still work.

THE DOOR CAN NOW BE SEEN: A TALL OPENING WITH A ROUNDED TOP.

BENNY

Everything in there is just big enough to function, and not a centimetre bigger. The airlock, for instance, accommodates one person in a protective suit: the fit is almost exact. The idea was to waste the minimum amount of air whenever one of the team went in or out.

ANGEL

They went out?

BENNY

Wouldn't you? Cooped up inside a tiny plastic shell with nothing to do but bump into your colleagues and breathe their recycled air? Anyway, they apparently had experiments to conduct. McKenzie's journal goes into some detail. Despite the basic level of technology, they had good space suits in those days: there are some still in there.

ANGEL

So you found the base more or less intact, with its systems capable of functioning? Excuse me for asking, but why did Professor Rakmussen feel the need to include an archaeologist on the team?

ZOOM TO BENNY'S FACE. SHE'S GRINNING. SHE STOPS GRINNING.

BENNY I'm sorry. That's a serious point. You're right: on a world without an atmosphere there's no weathering, no deposition of soil. Nothing changes here. So of course there's no digging to be done - no archaeology. Nothing for me to get my trowel into. In fact most of the time it's been a matter of going through the rubbish, sorting things out, tidying things up, trying to work out what each piece of equipment was used for and what things are missing. But a lot of the digs I've been on have been on Earth, and have concerned finds between three and ten centuries old. So I have a certain level of expertise. I'm familiar with the language, the technology, the historical context. And that's why I'm here. Nothing to do with needing to lie low for a few weeks, I can assure you of that.

THE GEODESIC DOME IS NEARBY NOW. ZOOM IN ON THE SLIGHTLY PITTED SURFACES; ZOOM INTO THE AIRLOCK.

ANGEL And when we go inside, what will we find?

BENNY Well, the idea is that we've reconstituted the base, as far as possible, so that it appears as it would have done when first used by McKenzie and his team. There was talk of bringing in some mannequins to lie in the bunks and sit at the comms console, but we decided it would be too macabre. So, apart from the absence of people, it's as it was five centuries ago. Let's go and - oh. Just a moment.

ZOOM TO ANGEL'S FACE. SHE LOOKS TO CAMERA; GRINS; WINKS.

ANGEL What is it?

ZOOM TO BENNY'S FACE: SHE HAS HER HEAD COCKED AND HER RIGHT HAND TO HER EAR.

BENNY We have visitors, apparently. The perimeter sensors have detected a vehicle.

ANGEL Is it the dismantling crew?

BENNY **No. They're not due for another ten hours. These are unexpected visitors. So much the more exciting sort. Come on, let's have a look at them.**

BENNY SETS OFF AT A TROT TOWARDS THE DOME'S ENTRY PORT. SHE GLANCES OVER HER SHOULDER. STOPS.

BENNY **Don't try to run in those heels. Just send your little holographic receiver over to the gate and I'll meet you there.**

FADE TO BLACK. FADE UP. BENNY, SLIGHTLY OUT OF BREATH, IS LOOKING AT THE VIDSCREEN NEXT TO THE ENTRY PORT.

BENNY **Oh, there you are again. See? Some sort of wheeled vehicle, and it's coming this way. Professor Moriarty, can you enlarge this image? Better. Ye gods, it's huge. I think there are two people in the cab. And they're pulling an even bigger trailer, with machinery on it.**

ANGEL **Are you sure it's not the dismantling crew? And who are you talking to? I thought you were the last one here.**

BENNY **Inasmuch as I spoke to the dismantling crew 15 minutes ago, and they were then still 150,000 kilometres away and not in any great hurry, I'm sure. Professor Moriarty is the name we gave the processor. We think it's amusing. So does Moriarty, to be fair.**

ANGEL **Then who can that be in the big vehicle?**

CLOSE-UP: ANGEL'S FACE. SHE MIMES A SNIGGER AND PLACES A FINGER VERTICALLY AGAINST HER LIPS.

BENNY **Let me think now. Who do we think is on this rock? Well, there's me. And there's a convict colony. So my guess is that these chaps are officials from the penal institute.**

ANGEL **No, they can't be.**

BENNY **Because?**

ZOOM IN TO BENNY'S FACE TO CATCH HER REACTION AS ANGEL EXPLAINS.

ANGEL Because there aren't any officials. I thought you were the one who did research? Earthgov took the view that as the convicts can't get anywhere, it was a waste of resources to provide staff. The colony was made self-governing. The prison governor and all the warders went back to Earth six months ago.

BENNY But that means...

ANGEL Yes. I'm afraid your visitors can only be - convicts!

BENNY Marvellous. Marvellous to the power of ten, in fact.

SILENCE.

BENNY Odd that none of your legal or production people mentioned the fact that the prisoners aren't actually locked up any more.

ANGEL Sorry. They probably thought you knew.

BENNY I suppose that's why they fitted the security perimeter. I wondered about that.

SILENCE. CLOSE-UP ON THE VIDSCREEN. THE VEHICLE TRUNDLES FORWARDS, ITS MASSIVE TYRES OCCASIONALLY STRIKING A BOULDER, CAUSING THE ENTIRE LEVIATHAN TO BOUNCE SLOWLY UP AND DOWN IN THE COMICAL WAY OF A BODY MOVING IN LOW GRAVITY.

BENNY Still, I suppose a self-governing colony must contain the better class of convicts. Embezzlers, tax evaders, and petty larcenists, I should imagine.

ANGEL Do you think so? I was told they were all the violent recidivists, the traitors and the war criminals. And the untreatable criminally insane, I think.

BENNY Thanks. You're cheering me up.

ANOTHER LONG SILENCE. STILL ON THE VIDSCREEN. THE VEHICLE IS GETTING CLOSE. TWO SPACE-SUITED FIGURES ARE NOW CLEARLY VISIBLE BEHIND THE TINTED SCREEN OF THE CONTROL POD, A SMALL SPHERICAL PROTUBERANCE ON THE FRONT OF THE TOWERING BULK OF THE VEHICLE.

EVEN THE GIRTH AND HEIGHT OF THE GREY, TRANSLUCENT ENERGY DOME FAILS TO OVERSHADOW THE VEHICLE. IT STOPS; SHUDDERS; IS STILL. A DOOR AT THE SIDE OF THE POD SLIDES OPEN AND THE TWO FIGURES, UNGAINLY IN THEIR PROTECTIVE SUITS, CLAMBER DOWN A LADDER TO THE GROUND. ONE OF THEM IS HOLDING A GUN.

THE VIDSCREEN FLICKERS, AND NOW SHOWS THE VIEW FROM THE CAMERA MOUNTED BESIDE THE DOME'S PORTAL. THE TWO FIGURES FILL THE SCREEN.

MAN'S VOICE Let us in.

BENNY You're attempting to amuse me, aren't you? You can stay outside, as far as I'm concerned. And I wouldn't get any closer: there's a security field.

CLOSE-UP: BENNY. SHE APPEARS TO BE LISTENING. SHE SHAKES HER HEAD SLOWLY. SHE TURNS TO ANGEL. SHE LOOKS CONCERNED AND ANGRY.

BENNY I'm going to try to be reasonable. Moriarty has just informed me that the security field generator - provided, as I'm sure you recall, by your company - has just developed a fault. He can't fix it. There is no back-up. Tell your people to get it back online now.

ANGEL Too late. Look.

THE VIDSCREEN. THE TWO FIGURES STEP FORWARD, AND THE ENERGY FIELD BULGES OUTWARDS TO ACCOMMODATE THEM. PULL BACK: THE INTERIOR OF THE DOME. THE TWO SUITED FIGURES ARE INSIDE, STAGGERING SLIGHTLY AS THEY FEEL THE ARTIFICIAL GRAVITY, THEN THEY ADVANCE, REMOVING THEIR HELMETS. THEY ARE BOTH MALE. ZOOM IN TO BENNY: HER BODY IS TENSE, HER SMILE IS BRITTLE. PULL BACK.

BENNY Hello. I wasn't expecting any gentleman callers. Still less a party of mass murderers. Who are you and what do you want?

ZOOM IN TO THE FIRST MAN. HE IS DARK-SKINNED; HIS FACE IS HEAVILY LINED. HE SMILES.

FIRST MAN I am a mass murderer, you are a terrorist, he is a decorated hero of EarthGov security. It all depends on your point of view.

BENNY I'm aware of the truism that history is written by the winning side.

FIRST MAN There was some trouble in South America, you may recall. A disagreement about the allocation of the proceeds of the cell-farming industry. Some thought that the profits belonged to the producers; others, and in particular Earthgov, believed that the needs of Rio Metropolis were paramount. The producers lost the argument.

ANGEL Oh, my! You're Carlos Patagoan. You poisoned three million people.

CARLOS'S SMILE BROADENS. HE SHRUGS.

CARLOS I was, quite literally, only following orders. But I admit that another individual's sense of morality might have intervened to prevent the killing. Mine didn't. I had a strong feeling of duty. My associate, on the other hand, is simply psychopathic. His name is Yib.

BENNY Delighted to make your acquaintance.

YIB IS PALE, WITH STRAW-COLOURED HAIR, NARROW EYES, AND A SHARP NOSE. HIS THIN LIPS SNEER AT BENNY THEN, AS HE TURNS TO ANGEL, HE GRINS, DISPLAYING EVEN, POINTED TEETH.

YIB Hey. Hello.

BENNY You're wasting your time. She's a hologram. See: this here's her receiver/emitter.

YIB CURSES AND MOVES INTO EXTREME CLOSE-UP AS HE FLAILS A HAND AT ANGEL. FOR A MOMENT THE IMAGE SWAYS WILDLY UNTIL THE HOVERING CAMERA RIGHTS ITSELF.

BENNY I told you.

ANGEL Hey! Do you mind?

CARLOS I apologise for my friend's appalling manners. But now we must proceed to business. Miss Summerfield, you asked what we wanted here. You should know that I have been elected to the post of Vice-President of Lunar Colony, and I am here with the authority of the President and the Council.

BENNY Okay. So?

ANGEL Is it true that you convicts call your colony Oz?

CARLOS That's the informal name, Miss Delightly. Convicts' slang. It is our home now.

ANGEL Benny, I looked this up. They've named it Oz after a magical land that was in a moving picture that was very popular in the twentieth century. A land over the rainbow.

BENNY I've seen that picture. But you might like to widen your research a bit. Try searching for references to Botany Bay and the judicial sentence called transportation.

CARLOS You're very knowledgeable, Miss Summerfield. I'm sure you've already guessed what we want from you. We convicts have inherited the prison structures, including a fusion reactor and a hydroponics plant. Small items, such as this handgun which, I assure you, is charged, can easily be smuggled in. But in order to survive and expand, we need up-to-date technology. Lunar Colony, as the only settlement here, has a self-proclaimed right to everything in, on and around this moon. Your expedition arrived here without our permission. We therefore have every right to impound the items you have left here: the field generators, the recycling plants, the solar-power transformers that I noticed outside this dome, the data store and the processor.

BENNY **Professor Moriarty.**

CARLOS **I beg your pardon?**

BENNY **Moriarty. The processor. Named after a criminal mastermind, so he should fit right in. It's nice to be wanted.**

CARLOS **I understand that you might feel bitter. You are, after all, merely the caretaker, as it were.**

BENNY **Caretaker? I'm - Oh, never mind. But we haven't left the heavy equipment here. There's a ship and a team of engineers on their way to dismantle it and take it back to Earth. In fact, they're due to arrive at any moment.**

CARLOS LAUGHS.

CARLOS **The perils of live journalism, eh, Miss Delightly? Yib is an avid follower of your reports. We've been watching the vidcast since it began, all the time that we have been driving from Lunar Colony to here. We know that the freighter under contract to Galaxy and Bakalov has only just left Earth and is not due for another ten hours.**

BENNY **At normal speed. But they'll put on a bit of a spurt, won't they? This vidcast is still going out. And there are ships in orbit that can reach us in a couple of hours.**

CARLOS **That's very true. They will come quickly - if the machinery is still here. If there is a life at stake.**

BENNY **Oh, no. You can't -**

CARLOS **The logic is inexorable. I will kill you and take the heavy plant. Miss Delightly will broadcast the whole thing. It will be plain that there is no reason to hurry to rescue you or the machinery. Both will be gone.**

BENNY **I've got a gun of my own, you know.**

CARLOS Another fib, Miss Summerfield. Where is this supposed gun? There's no point in trying to delay the inevitable. Prepare to die.

CARLOS RAISES HIS RIGHT HAND. CLUTCHED IN THE GLOVE OF HIS SURVIVAL SUIT IS A SNUB-NOSED BLASTER.

BENNY THROWS HERSELF TOWARDS ANGEL. EXTREME CLOSE-UP. BENNY IS SWEARING VEHEMENTLY. SHE DISAPPEARS FROM VIEW AS SHE DIVES THROUGH ANGEL'S HOLOGRAPHIC IMAGE. SUDDENLY THE INTERIOR OF THE DOME SWOOPS AND CIRCLES CRAZILY: BENNY HAS THROWN THE CAMERA AT CARLOS.

CARLOS Ow! And the devil may take these damned gloves. After her, Yib.

THE CAMERA STEADIES ITSELF. LONG SHOT: BENNY, RUNNING, ZIG-ZAGGING, TOWARDS THE LINE OF STRUCTURES AT THE PERIMETER OF THE DOME. YIB, CHASING HER, ENCUMBERED BY HIS SURVIVAL SUIT. FLASHES OF LIGHT AND PUFFS OF DUST AS CARLOS FIRES THE BLASTER.

PAN ROUND. ANGEL HAS GIVEN UP TRYING TO KEEP PACE WITH HER CAMERA. SHE DISAPPEARS. HER RECEIVER/EMITTER DARTS UPWARDS AND FLIES AFTER BENNY. CARLOS, MOUTHING CURSES, TRIES TO RUN AND SHOOT AT THE SAME TIME.

PAN BACK. BENNY, PANTING, ARRIVES AT THE LINE OF STRUCTURES. SHE LOOKS OVER HER SHOULDER, AND SQUEEZES BETWEEN THE UPRIGHTS OF TWO OF THE RECYCLING CYLINDERS. THERE IS VERY LITTLE LIGHT HERE. BENNY FLATTENS HERSELF AGAINST CURVED METAL. SHE WAITS, MOTIONLESS. SHE GLANCES UP AT THE CAMERA.

BENNY (Whisper) Get out of sight, you flying moron!

ZOOM OUT. VIEW BENNY FROM ABOVE AND BEHIND. MIDDLE DISTANCE: YIB FORCES HIS BULK BETWEEN THE CYLINDERS. BENNY RUNS FORWARD, STABS HIM WITH HER TROWEL AND KICKS HIS GROIN.

YIB

Wha! Aah! Jesus, Buddha and Moses!

BENNY RUNS TO THE BACK OF THE RECYCLING PLANT, CROUCHING LOW, SCUTTLES FROM THE SHADOW OF EACH METAL UPRIGHT TO THE NEXT ALONG THE SHADOWY GAP BETWEEN THE MACHINERY AND THE PERIMETER OF THE DOME. SHE REACHES THE BLACK, CUBICAL MASS THAT EXTENDS FROM THE BACK OF THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY BASE CAMP. TROWEL IN HAND, WITH HER BACK TO THE GEODESIC STRUCTURE, SHE CREEPS ROUND THE HEMISPHERICAL STRUCTURE.

PULL BACK AS BENNY APPROACHES THE FRONT OF THE SMALL DOME. SURVEY THE WHOLE SITE. CARLOS IS STANDING AT THE CENTRE OF THE SPACE RECENTLY OCCUPIED BY THE ACCOMMODATION UNITS. HE IS CALLING FOR YIB. CLOSER: ANGEL'S RECEIVER/EMITTER HAS COME TO REST, HOVERING AT WAIST HEIGHT, AND ANGEL HAS REAPPEARED. SHE IS CONVERSING AND GESTURING: HER INTERLOCUTORS ARE PRESUMABLY IN THE VIDCAST STUDIO FROM WHICH HER HOLOGRAPHIC IMAGE IS BEING SENT. THE EFFECT IS COMIC. ZOOM IN TO ANGEL. ZOOM OUT: ANGEL'S VIEWPOINT; WIDE SCAN.

ANGEL There you are! It's okay everyone, I've got the camera back. Now, where's Benny?

A MOVEMENT IN THE SHADOWS BETWEEN THE TOWERS AND GIRDERS. CARLOS AIMS HIS BLASTER. YIB STAGGERS FORWARD INTO THE GREY LIGHT.

YIB (Shouting) The bitch has gone round the back. I lost her.

ZOOM IN TO BENNY, WHO IS COMING INTO VIEW, CAUTIOUSLY SIDE-STEPPING. PAN TO CARLOS, THEN TO YIB: THEY HAVEN'T SEEN HER YET. BENNY REACHES THE AIRLOCK OF THE ORIGINAL MOON BASE.

CARLOS Idiot! There she is!

YIB Shoot her. Kill her.

CARLOS I can't risk hitting the machinery. I'll take care of her the old-fashioned way.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE AIRLOCK, BENNY TURNS AND WAVES. SHE DISAPPEARS INTO THE INTERIOR. CARLOS, FOLLOWED BY YIB, TRUDGES TOWARDS THE OLD MOON BASE. HE APPROACHES ANGEL.

CARLOS You're still here, Miss Delightly? Good. Follow me with your camera. I want your viewers to have no doubt that Miss Summerfield is dead.

VIEWPOINT: OVER CARLOS'S SHOULDER. APPROACHING THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY MOON BASE.

CARLOS All that time, energy and money, for this? It's no bigger than a freighter's survival pod. This must be the airlock, I suppose. Come out, Miss Summerfield. Let Miss Delightly's audience watch you die with dignity.

A LOUD CRACK; A HIGH-PITCHED WHINE. CARLOS STEPS BACK AND ALMOST FALLS.

BENNY (From inside the base camp) I told you I had a gun.

CARLOS BACKS AWAY, AND GESTURES TOWARDS YIB TO DO LIKEWISE.

CARLOS (Shouting) It makes no difference, Miss Summerfield. No one is coming to rescue you. Yib and I are going to power down the systems. When the energy field disappears you'll regret that I didn't kill you. I suggest you point your weapon at your skull and end it now. By the time anyone reaches this place Yib and I will be long gone, with all your heavy equipment in our truck. And your body will be cold, lying in a lake of your frozen blood. Goodbye.

ZOOM IN TO CARLOS. HE TURNS TO CAMERA.

CARLOS Delightly, I want this camera with me. It's not to leave my side until Yib and I have loaded the truck and the trailer. Everyone will see that we have stripped this site of everything of

value. Which, I must stress, is being confiscated by the authority of Lunar Colony. Then, when we have finished, come back here. Go into this ludicrous and antiquated little igloo. And show everyone that the bitch caretaker is dead. Do you understand?

ANGEL You can't make me do anything, you bastard. But in the spirit of real-time reporting, and with a view to the ratings, I'll go along with it.

* * *

ORGAN MUSIC. CATHEDRAL INTERIOR. PICTURE GRADUAL FADE TO BLACK.

VOICEOVER And I hope you enjoyed that re-run of a favourite episode of *Corsets and Choirboys*. Let's rejoin Angel Delightly on Earth's moon.

FADE UP: PAN ACROSS THE LUNAR SURFACE. ROCKS AND PEAKS STAND OUT IN SHARP RELIEF IN THE SUNLIGHT. ZOOM IN ON ANGEL.

ANGEL Well, I'm still here. But Carlos and Yib have finished loading their vehicles, and they're on their way back to Lunar Colony.

LONG-DISTANCE SHOT: GRAINY IMAGE OF A WHEELED VEHICLE DISAPPEARING OVER A RIDGE.

ANGEL As you can see, there's not much left. I'm glad I'm here only as a hologram. I wouldn't last long dressed like this.

ANGEL FLOUNCES THE SKIRT OF HER GOWN. ZOOM OUT. THE GREY DOME HAS DISAPPEARED. THERE'S NOTHING BUT ANGEL AND THE ENDLESS GREY LANDSCAPE. PAN ROUND. EMPTY OF THEIR CONTENTS, THE MASSIVE FRAMEWORKS OF METAL ARE ALL THAT REMAIN OF THE EXPLORATION SITE, AND THEY ARE INCONGRUOUSLY SYMMETRICAL AGAINST THE RANDOM JAGGEDNESS OF THE MOONSCAPE. AMONGST THEM NESTLES THE SMALL GEODESIC DOME THAT HAS STOOD FOR FIVE CENTURIES.

ANGEL Carlos tried to drive his vehicle over the old moon base, but it was too big to fit between the metal uprights. He became very angry. He tried to make me send my headcam in there to make sure that Benny was dead, but I pointed out that as I was a hologram he was in no position to issue threats. In any case, the Galaxy Corporation follows EarthGov guidelines on the broadcasting of images of people who have died in particularly gruesome ways.

ZOOM IN TO THE OLD MOON BASE UNTIL IT FILLS THE FRAME. STILL SHOT. SILENCE.

ANGEL But Benny can't have survived. The old moon base will be her last resting place. And so it's time to wrap up another real-time report. And you must admit this was a pretty exciting one. It was unfortunate for Benny, but good luck for the rest of us that those convicts showed up when they did. I was getting rather bored with all that historical stuff, weren't you? Now it's time for me to return to the studio, and I don't suppose anyone will visit this spot again - well, perhaps not for another five hundred years.

PAN TOWARDS ANGEL. PAN BACK TO THE MOON BASE. MOVEMENT AT THE AIRLOCK. AN ARM, WAVING. A FIGURE, ENCLOSED WITHIN AN ANTIQUE SPACE SUIT, EMERGES AWKWARDLY INTO THE BLINDING LIGHT.

ANGEL Oh, my!

FADE TO BLACK.

* * *

FADE UP.

Manual writing (large, ill-formed letters sprawl across the parallel lines of the page): 'Bloody hell. It's hard to write with these gloves on. So it didn't matter that there was only one bullet in the gun: once I'd suited up I wouldn't have been able to pull the trigger anyway.

`Only one bullet, and I wasted it. Missed creepy Carlos, couldn't stop him taking the heavy machinery. Couldn't have stopped him walking into the base and bumping me off. That was the first time I was sure I was going to die.

`Only one bullet in Houston Mackenzie's revolver. It was his insurance policy, then. His promise to himself that whatever happened, whatever disaster befell the expedition, he wouldn't have to experience the cold vacuum sucking his life and internal organs from his body.

`At first, Moriarty told me what was going on outside. But Carlos had the sense to disconnect the professor before he tried to tamper with any of the other systems. I was aware of Moriarty's brave struggle to stay online and protect the base's integrity. I knew when he transferred to his batteries; I felt him blocking Carlos's attempts to override the pass codes, then switching data from core to core as Carlos peppered him with procedures that obliged him to overwrite himself. Moriarty relayed to me Carlos's every oath and snarl of frustration; I flinched when Carlos went to work on the professor's physical structure with a hammer and a screwdriver. When his batteries were compromised Moriarty said goodbye. But he didn't give up: for another ten minutes he used the residual power in his circuits to maintain his persona and do what he could to hinder Carlos.

`Then the implant went silent, and I knew that the only way I could find out what was happening was to stick my head out of the airlock. And I wasn't going to risk that. I didn't know what would go first: gravity; atmosphere. I had to get into the suit.

`Later, I felt the vibration when Carlos tried to get his truck between the superstructures. I had hoped that it wouldn't occur to him simply to crush the base with his wheels. But from his point of view it was the obvious thing to do. That was the second time I was sure I was going to die. Thank heavens for the excessive zeal and thoroughness of the civil engineers subcontracted to the Bakalov, that's all I can say.

`That Delightly woman has left one of her cameras with me. It's hovering at my left shoulder now in a disconcerting manner. I can see it only if I twist my entire body round - and in this suit that isn't as straightforward as it sounds.

`I'm sitting in the doorway of the airlock. Almost floating, really. There's something almost intoxicating about near-weightlessness. Or perhaps this twenty-first-century air has too much oxygen in the mix.

`While I'm waiting for the ship to arrive I'll write down an account of what happened here today. As a sort of addendum to Mackenzie's journal. And I'll leave the notebook here, for the next historian to discover.

`Look at Earth, hanging up there in space. So big, so blue, so beautiful. Still beautiful, even though I know what it's really like under those fluffy clouds. I've been here three weeks and it's the first time I've seen it. Ironic, really.

`Mackenzie didn't live here under an energy field. He had this view of Earth. He lived with it for three months. He must have spent hours trying to work out whether he could see Clarksville from here. Did he look for Scotland, too? Perhaps he didn't even think of it. How long does it take to forget where you've come from? Did he think of himself as Scottish, or Texan, or North American? How many of us, living and working and sleeping and drinking and fornicating on our scattered worlds, think of this blue sphere from which we all came?

`Clarksville's drowned now. But back then Mackenzie knew where to look for it. He could stare up at it.

`Oh, God. He had Clarksville. He had a home to go back to.'

PULL BACK. BENNY'S SPACE SUIT IS SHUDDERING. ZOOM IN TO THE FACE SCREEN. BEHIND THE DARKENED VISOR, BENNY'S FACE IS WET WITH TEARS.

BENNY Oh, Delightly off.

FADE UP MUSIC. ZOOM OUT. PAN ACROSS LUNAR LANDSCAPE.

CREDITS, SUBLIMINAL PRODUCT SHOTS, AND SPONSOR MESSAGES.

End of exhibit 23A

The Slight Façade

Magnus Anderson

Remember that soil is an unhappy document, layered with the poisons of industry and war, and, so often, the relics it keeps are miserable too; abandoned as civilisations fail, or lost in haste, or forgotten with the demise of their owners.

Some, though, are there for a purpose. Left behind by way of a gentle deceit, they may feel lost, but that, as the title says, is a slight façade. These relics leave stories behind them. They are impatient. They were *meant* to be found.

Benny stood alone, better dressed than she had been for years, watching the splendid crowd gather. They were all humans, and vibrant specimens too; greeting and chatting and radiant with self-belief. The grand hall was a spectacle of wealth and vulgarity. Aspirant plutocrats jostled with the braying intelligentsia, all competing for attention over their lunchtime drinks.

Benny was on the first of a flight of stairs at the side of the foyer, accidentally visible above them, and where she had been since she had arrived, feeling the first real wrenches of alienation since she had returned to Earth.

This was a new Rubicon too: she had crashed unlikely gatherings before, assumed identities, even borrowed useful things and returned

them barely after their absence had been noticed. But being here compounded her tension with guilt. She had never before so plainly, unambiguously, been a thief.

'Shockingly pleased with themselves, aren't they?' said a voice behind her.

She turned defensively; a man was standing at her shoulder on the step above her - greying, stooped, very elderly. He waited long enough for her to register him, but not to compose herself, and then continued: 'They're here to be seen of course - the great, the good and the ungodly.'

Benny half-turned to face him. For a first guess, she thought he was an isolated soul out of place amongst the gaudy networking, and had marked her as much the same. She chose politeness.

'They look dedicated enough - this lecture's obviously quite a draw.'

'More entertainment than education, I would hazard. This year, I understand the Regal Professor will be talking about an ancient book he's found.' He smiled at her, teasingly. 'Who would come all this way to hear about a book?'

Benny shifted; that was absolutely how she had come to be here. 'Do you know many people here then?'

'A few,' he said airily. 'That silver head over there is wickedly rich. A very handy fellow to know. And the beard talking to him is a decently influential historian.' He held out a hand to Benny. 'That's what I am as well, by the way. Ravel Calabrio. Art history.'

Benny took his hand. She had decided earlier to stay with the cover she had adopted to secure a ticket. 'Sarah Bishop,' she said. 'I'm an archaeologist.'

Ravel Calabrio's eyes flickered briefly, with approval or perhaps recognition, but they quickly creased into a smile. 'Good, good,' he said and swivelled back to the gathering. 'And that is -'

His sentence stopped. In his eye line was a figure who, even to Benny, stood out as unconventional: he wore a long-tailed suit topped with a bowl haircut, both of which suited his mid-forties badly. Despite the distance, he conveyed a hollow pomposity.

'That is Salim Barr. He's an archaeologist too.'

'Oh, really?' Benny's interest was genuine.

'An unusual one, though. More of an ideologue - the views he holds are quite robust. Damaging, even.'

'Damaging? How?'

Calabrio's voice lost some of its levity. 'I mean literally. He

disapproves of some interpretations of the discipline - some *artefacts* - and if so then, well. I believe he's sometimes had them purged from the field.'

Benny, stunned, looked at the figure - he had a graceless, affected swagger; he embodied the brash superiority of the crowd but, if this was true, he also crystallised it into amorality. She felt spikes of anger: at the obscenity of stealing from history, and the arrogance of a man so assured of his right to do so.

As she watched, Barr was turning towards them, when much nearer there was a brief clatter. Benny saw too late what had happened.

'Sorry, sorry!' Calabrio was staggering to upright himself at the foot of the stairs. 'It's all right, I lost my footing.'

Benny hurried to help him, but he was already standing. 'Are you hurt?'

'No, no, only my pride.' Stable now, he grinned at her. 'I've had a few knocks in my life. I'm 105, you know.'

A soft siren rang out. The luminaries of the great hall looked about them and became serious about finishing their drinks.

'Time to go in,' said Calabrio. 'I wonder, Miss Bishop, if you would do me the honour of accompanying me?'

'Of course,' she replied. For some reason it did feel like a privilege.

They had starting moving, when Calabrio said: 'You are so much younger than everyone here. May I ask, how did you manage to get a place?'

Benny had acquired a paper ticket under a false name during a carefully engineered service outage, and financed it with an unpaid library fine at a poorly managed university.

'I won it,' she said, and they followed as the audience swilled into the auditorium.

'So, was that illuminating?' asked Calabrio. They were filing out, Calabrio leading the way, Benny slightly behind him and at his elbow in case his stability gave way again. She was a little taller than him now that they were level, his stoop more pronounced as he scanned the floor while he shuffled.

'Played the audience, I thought,' Benny said. 'A bit melodramatic.'

'Melodramatic?'

'Yes, all that stuff about soil being full of the crimes of humanity or whatever. No archaeologist would say that.'

'It was a performance, but then this is that sort of a show.' He

indicated about them and lowered his voice. 'You must forgive him the need to find a way to be meaningful to this audience. They've come a long way, and do you know' - he whispered now - 'they don't know a thing.'

'They won't know much more after that talk,' said Benny. 'Pretty much all he had to say was that centuries ago some pop poets went through a phase of burying jewellery, and if you can dig it up now you'll never have to polish your own scanner again.'

Calabrio was smiling; it may have been to her, but as he stared at the ground, swaying, it looked like an internal, tolerant amusement. 'But that wouldn't interest you, would it, Sarah?'

'No,' said Benny, then realised the word had come too sharply, and so added with a measured carelessness: 'No, not at all.' It was disingenuous - did he know something? Or had he guessed? The private burden in her bag grew heavier.

They had crossed the foyer now, and Benny looked about her to find a way to leave, but Calabrio was still ahead of her.

'I'd like to carry this on,' he said, turning. 'May I suggest that we find somewhere out of the way to sit?'

The conversation had a sudden awkward feel to it. 'I'm sorry, I don't have much time.' Benny peered restlessly at the doorways.

'I should very much prefer that we did.' He had straightened and was nearly at her eye level. Tut it is up to you.'

Her cab would be here soon, she could disappear in the foyer crowd for a few minutes. Benny loosened and opened her mouth, but Calabrio wasn't finished: 'It really depends, Miss Bishop, on how much you would like the authorities involved.'

The grand hall had a café, as it turned out and, although it was unstaffed for the afternoon, it was also unlocked, and automated enough to serve them tea.

Calabrio was talking. He was without menace, instead heaving a weary disappointment into his words, and guilt wormed through Benny in cold, knotted lumps.

'I am a professor at the University of Belgravia. You know about that, Sarah.'

Benny nodded.

'You know because you've been there. Recently.'

Benny nodded again.

'I have lectureships in a lot of places, not all of them nearby, and the university doesn't have students in the conventional sense, so my job

is mainly to represent our academic research. And to be a custodian of the library. The physical, paper book library.'

Benny felt a white sickness in her chest.

'I'm very fond of my library. Really very fond. I know every book in it, I'm fairly sure, and have read a fair few of them too. So I was quite upset, quite upset, to learn that one of them had been stolen.'

Benny flushed. The air felt very cool and still.

'We found that one of the last visitors to the library didn't seem to be a member of the university at all. She had a library card, but was more like,' he paused as he snatched a phrase from the air, 'a ghost in our machine.'

Benny couldn't meet his eyes. They would still be warm, and sad, and that would be too painful. 'And when we looked harder, we found that this person had bought a very costly ticket to the Regal Professor's lecture, a lecture on that very book, and mysteriously managed to use her generous library overdraft to do so.' She felt blood rising in her face, realising now that she was comprehensively undone. 'So, I thought I would buy a ticket myself, and go to that lecture, and do you know what?'

He waited until Benny looked up. He smiled; it was as genial and saddened as she had feared.

'I found her.'

Benny had bruised though years of military school, and had then been toughened more by real, deadlier field trips. She had been grazed by war and heartbreak and stayed firm. This man broke her though.

'I'm sorry.'

'Do you have it with you?'

Benny took her bag off her shoulder and pulled out a cushioned envelope. She gave it to Calabrio, who opened it, and pulled out a dark, hard and ancient object. He held it carefully in his hands, and it fell open, cleaving neatly to its spine. His eyes closed with delight.

he said. 'Smell that.'

Benny, paralysed, couldn't.

'In forgetful, covered and sunless keep, where a surgeon slipped into unseen sleep,' he read randomly. 'You know, Sarah, you really couldn't have picked a more personal volume to have taken from me. I have something of a connection with this book.'

'I'm so sorry. Really. I didn't want to steal it, you know.'

'May I ask why you took it?'

'I wanted to read it, that's all, I promise. It was the only way:

there's an embargo on scanning it, there are no electronic copies anywhere. You're not even allowed a PDA in the library.'

'And you were keen to know what it said, and why it was secret.'

'Yes.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes. Well, no, there was this lecture, which had the same title as one of the stories in the book. I thought there would be a connection, that a book that had been hidden for years might be about to become very famous. Very famous indeed.'

'I suspect you're right.' He leaned back. 'All right, I believe you, Sarah. I've had a century to develop a judgement of character, and I think you're guilty of intellectual curiosity - of which, on the whole, I approve.'

Benny was relieved, astonished and silent.

'I'm thankful in a way,' Calabrio continued. 'I had suspected that the borrower was an old acquaintance revisiting my life, and you are certainly preferable to him. As for the library account, do you have any means to pay it back at the moment?'

She shook her head. 'I will do.'

'Well, then, we won't worry about that yet. If you do come back to the university though, you had better call in on me first. For your own good. And mine too.' He handed her an old-fashioned calling card, made of mottled paper, and with the details raised in a curving script. It suited him.

Calabrio lifted himself out of his chair, and Benny jumped to help him. Her apologies and thanks accompanied him to the door, where he said: 'You know, I'm really sorry you couldn't read this book. It's not my choice at all.' And he left.

Benny stood motionless in the doorway, almost pathetically grateful for her reprieve. 'You don't normally pick your battles that well,' she muttered. The foyer had emptied of all but the cleaner drones, and Benny's cab would have been waiting for minutes, and perhaps abandoned her for another fare. Time to stop standing around, she thought.

She half-ran outside: it was still there. She clambered in, pushing her bag ahead of her, and fell solidly into the seat, where she tossed her hair behind her shoulders, rubbed her hands over her still reddened face, and opened her eyes to look squarely into a vicious pistol that Salim Barr had levelled at her head.

'So in a way I am in your debt, Miss Bishop,' Barr said, disingenuously.

Benny nodded and seethed. Barr hadn't given an ultimatum, or even a reason for hijacking her cab yet. Instead, eloquently but tortuously, he circled around his narrative, amusing himself with her absolute attention, often making trivial philosophical comments with mysterious pride. Benny wasn't shy of academia, but she resented booking for one lecture and receiving three, especially as they were progressively more stressful.

Salim Barr was loquacious and smooth, but - skewed with pomposity and a whine that tailed his rhetorical questions - fell short of charismatic, which was a shame for him, since his deliberate and studied stylings suggested a need to be admired. He was easily withering though.

'And what a creditor to have, I find myself saying.'

Benny's nervousness at the gun had dissipated - he wanted her to listen. More, he appeared to *need* an audience; his speech was practised, but trilled insistently as if it were rarely let loose.

'One who, in spite of appearances, will just keep giving.'

The pistol was no longer pointed at her, but waving with his hand. If she had been trained, she could easily have disarmed him; she had half a guess that he wouldn't shoot if she simply walked out of the cab. Her nerve wasn't up to that yet, though.

'Which brings me on to a slight façade. The Slight Façade.'

At last, after his deliberations on the lecture, the state of the war, humanity - the race as well as the morality - Benny's clothes, the profligacy of hiring cabs, the changing colour of the sky and the habits of the middle-aged, he came to his point.

'I've an interest in that tome. Not only since the lecture, which was skating and trite, I thought, didn't you think? I thought it was. No, I have known of the book for some years now, some decades even' - Benny noted that his neck throbbed, and his skin bore the scars of anti-aging surgery - 'and have never lost sight of what it means.'

He paused and raised one end of his mouth.

'It is a fib. A nasty black mark on the real art of learning about the past. It is a parlour game, a treasure hunt for childish minds, and distorts the real work of a historian. Of an archaeologist.' He beamed a special satisfaction to her. **'I am an archaeologist, you know. If you knew much about my discipline, Miss Bishop' - Benny smarted, but held her cover - 'you would appreciate the esteem in which we hold fact.'**

His haughtiness piqued her. She was more irritated by the gun than ever.

'So whatever pot of gold this book will lead to, it is worth much less than the value in ensuring that it will never be found.' His voice buzzed deeper still. 'Never be found.'

'You can arrange that, can you?' It was the first sentence Benny had said since boarding the cab, other than confirming who she was when he apprehended her.

'Oh, I think so. There are four copies of that book, and I know where they all are. I thought I had managed to ensure that those are the only four there will ever be too, but that lecture has upped the ante a little.'

'They'll allow it to be duplicated now. After the Regal Lecture, they must.'

I hope not. But you are right, that is a risk; the Professor has one of the copies, so I might have to act with more haste, more decisively than I would like.'

He peered at her, his endgame was coming.

'Another copy is in my personal collection. A third, is safely a long way from Earth, literally waiting to be incinerated on my word. And the fourth. Oh, the fourth copy is the only one in an open library, which I visited recently to remove it from public view. Only, of course, it wasn't there.'

'How odd,' said Benny.

'It had been stolen, Sarah Bishop.' Benny locked her jaw. 'And I know who by. Sarah Bishop. Please, give it to me.'

'I don't have it.'

Barr looked down at the seat between them.

'I have a neural scanner here that says you're in a lying frame of mind. Why don't you empty your bag?'

The pistol now looked very real and his intention dangerous. Benny picked her bag up from the floor and upended it onto the seat. Tissues, a trowel, her PDA, briefly used make-up, un-named software paks and plenty of mud clattered out, but nothing large enough to hold a book. Barr glanced at the pile, and then at the neural scanner.

'You had it with you when you arrived, didn't you?' She didn't need to answer; his screen lit up instead. 'Where is it now?'

Benny was silent, but Barr was scanning the debris from her bag. He picked out a card.

'Genuine paper,' he said, and turned it over. 'Ravel Calabrio.' The name meant something to him - his mouth and eyes tightened.

'He'll have gone to the terminal. How much head start has he had?'

Benny didn't answer immediately. 'How much?' he shouted this time, but didn't wait. 'Get out!' He enforced the point with the pistol. Benny backed to the door, and as it slid open she grasped her bag and PDA in a hand each. The cab was still outside the grand hall, and she landed heavily on the stone floor as the vehicle rose quickly into the sky, the door closing as it went.

For the second time in an hour, Benny stood at the grand hall entrance. She was shaken and angry, in clothes that didn't suit her, near no one she knew. Her calf was hurting from the fall. She wanted to clean up and rest.

She sat and, slowly, deliberately, assembled her composure. When she had gathered her bag onto her lap, she flagged another cab from her PDA. There was one in range, due in three minutes.

As the time passed, she dwelt on Salim Barr's weird semi-conversation, ruffled on the idea that he was a man who would burn a book that Ravel Calabrio wanted her to read. It was a grim thought indeed. 'I've kicked things off again,' she said quietly. 'Seems to be my habit.'

In the final minute, the pain eased, and she became aware of the danger she had escaped; the real, serious threat that Barr posed. As she limped to the cab, she had a costly moment of clarity.

'This is one of those times when you really get to decide whether to do the right thing,' she said, as she swung into her seat, adrenalin picking up in her chest, and then she addressed the cab's navigator: 'The terminal please. And however fast you're allowed to go, go faster than that.'

The fastest the cab could go was a safe steady pace; agonising compared to the lead Barr had. Calabrio's quarter of an hour on them both would even her chances, but she would still need some advantage other than surprise.

'Hello,' said Benny. The navigator didn't have a visual avatar, not even an on-screen face, merely a disembodied voice. It was a standard English butler, even-handed and unassuming - popular on the off-world suburbs, a sign of economy on Earth.

'Hello passenger,' it replied.

'I don't want to be taken to the drop point, I want to go to the landing bay - can you do that?'

'No, sorry passenger. The drop point is conveniently located near the terminal facilities. You may take a land transport from there and travel anywhere in the terminal.'

They were flying about forty metres above the building limit in a stream of other short-rangers. As they progressed, the concentration of cabs in view was increasing. There was no way of spotting Barr while in flight.

'Can you overtake this line and take me straight to the door then?'

'Only a manually operated flight may leave the traffic queue. I am not licensed for manual flight.'

No, thought Benny, nor am I, but that won't stop me from trying. She leant forward to the driver's area, reached for the over-ride stick and pushed it as hard as she could.

The cab lurched downwards, immediately sinking into a decline that felt nearly vertical. A HUD sprang onto the screen, and the one reading that Benny saw clearly was that the dip was thirty degrees below horizontal - if they were going any faster, it was towards the ground.

Benny let go. The vehicle thudded back to a horizontal, and then lifted and banked back into the traffic stream, which parted without protest. With another jolt, the cab resumed its course.

All right, she thought, we won't try that again.

'You used the emergency controls,' said the navigator. 'May I ask what happened?'

'There was an emergency,' said Benny. 'A big one. Don't worry, I averted it.'

'Thank you', said the voice, 'I'm glad to hear it.'

At the terminal gate, Benny hurriedly scanned the crowd ahead of her. Passengers, mostly human, were milling towards waiting areas and departure pads. Barr's distinctive clothes couldn't be seen, and Benny had resigned herself to running to the bay hub when a noise made her turn.

There was a cab rank behind her, and she spotted a familiar coat tail emerging from one of the vehicles a few metres away. Barr - it was Barr, she was sure - was standing on the pavement with his head leaning through the door of a cab. Eventually he emerged with an armful of small objects, which he showed, scowling, to the cab's navigator. For a second Benny was confused, and then she realised: the jumble from her bag must have counted as luggage, or rubbish, and the cab wasn't allowed to complete the transaction until Barr had cleared it out. She had gained a valuable minute, and, adrenalised, scurried into the building.

There was no flight heading anywhere near the university for an

hour, but Calabrio had left her in some haste when he noted the time. She scanned the flights. Nowhere made sense. He had said he worked in a number of places, but there were no clues here. She would have to look on foot.

Conscious of the time she had used, Benny looked behind her and saw Barr advancing, oblivious to her but approaching the screens and helpdesk. Benny was about to sprint off when she saw a crew of humans and hoverbots, mostly men, looking bored and nearly sleazy, gathered nearby. They were waiting for something to happen - why? To catch someone? Then she saw their cameras.

'Hey,' she said to a nearby photographer, 'I don't know if you're on the lookout for someone famous, but that's the Regal Professor over there.' She pointed at Barr, who was still facing the screens, and ran to the bay hub. Behind her she heard Barr's distinctive voice bark as men and cameras shouted for his attention. His protests echoed down the curving corridors long after she had left him out of sight.

Calabrio was waiting patiently for his flight when, flushed and breathless, Benny found him. Perhaps in deference to his age, he had been given his own land glide to take him to the bay, but the ship to New Sau Paolo hadn't arrived yet, and he had sunk into his thoughts as he held a small package to his stomach.

'Ravel Calabrio,' called Benny.

'Sarah Bishop,' said Calabrio, emerging, 'I didn't think I would be seeing you again so soon. Or perhaps ever, if I'm honest. Is there something else you would like to drop off?'

'It's the book,' said Benny, her words caught in uneven breath.

'Miss Bishop, I really can't let you have it back. It will be safe, I promise you.'

'But it isn't!' Benny didn't have her control back yet.

'Yes it is. Look, I'll find a way to let you read it, read it here if you like, it's simply that I cannot let it out of my sight. It's very precious, to me personally as well as to -'

'Salim Barr wants it. He knows it's here.'

Calabrio stopped, stunned.

'Well,' he said. 'Well, then. I don't dislike many people, but I'm afraid Mr Barr is one of them. Is he nearby?'

'Very,' said Benny.

Calabrio lifted himself up in his seat, focusing ahead of himself. 'I think I shall postpone my return to my sabbatical, until I've had some time to think. What is the safest way from here, Sarah?'

Eight minutes later, Benny and Calabrio made a carefully timed dash on their land glide to the entrance hall. On their way, they passed the last of the glides delivering passengers to the New Sau Paolo flight. It carried a dozen people, one of whom recognised them. Bewildered and furious, Salim Barr struggled with his seatbelt and banged on the dashboard of the vehicle, but it nonetheless continued to take him to the distant bay, while the pair was lost amongst the crowds.

They had found a hotel - a hostel, really - some way from the terminal, although near enough that the engines could sometimes be heard when craft landed too quickly.

'I hope you won't mind,' Calabrio had said, 'that I need a space to gather my thoughts,' and Benny had gone with him because he was an old man who needed help, and because the adventure had caught her.

There was a real person at the check-in: a bristly, squash-faced man with mismatching eyes. He was reading the news and watching it on a screen at the same time, but squinted at them too as they came in to the lobby. 'Booking?' he asked, standing.

'No,' said Calabrio, 'it's a rather short-notice visit.'

The desk man surveyed them. 'This is my own hotel. I'm careful about who I have here.'

Calabrio looked hurt. 'I shall be most careful too, I assure you.'

They were studied for another few seconds. With a nod, he showed they had passed his test. 'All right. Name?'

Calabrio gave his.

'Cockers!' said the man cheerfully.

'What?'

'Cockers Calabrio! That's your name, right? Calabrio. Like Cockers Calabrio. I used to love him.'

'I don't know who you mean,' said Ravel Calabrio, somewhat defensively.

'Haven't you heard of him?'

'He was a singer twenty years ago,' added Benny. It immediately sounded impertinent.

'No I have not heard of him,' Calabrio said snappishly. 'Can we have our room?'

The desk man had decided to be cheerful now, and handed them a passcard, while singing a dated chart song as they went upstairs.

They had few things with them, so there was plenty of room for Benny to pace, while Calabrio sat on the bed, sometimes looking at her, sometimes at the book lying beside him.

'I thought Barr had forgotten about the book. I had often hoped that he had forgotten about me. It seems that the Regal Professor's lecture has resurrected those memories for quite a few people.'

'How do you know him?'

'The Professor? I barely do. He's not in my field, but at a couple of conferences -'

'No, Salim Barr. How do you know him?'

Calabrio's movements halted. He stared at the book, and his words softened with introspection.

'Salim Barr. Salim Barr is notorious, at least in his own, limited circle. He has ideas about the nature of the past. The purpose of archaeology. I think he is a man who once had a great intellect. A great mind. But it is frozen now.'

Benny had stopped walking.

'He has no *imagination*.'

She sat on the bed, with the book between them.

'I think something in him changed, some time ago. He suffered some emotional set-backs, and after that he seemed, well, almost stunted. He stopped playing with ideas, and started insisting on them. His brain was still lively, but it had fallen into a rut - he would talk through the same subject repeatedly, battering people to agree with him until they were too tired to argue. He wrote plenty of papers, always on these subjects, always his own dogmatic take on archaeology, but never responded to criticism. At least, not sensibly.'

He raised an eyebrow on his otherwise still face. It indicated to Benny that there had been epic, personal arguments, and that Calabrio wasn't going to describe them.

'It wasn't behaviour that suited a university. My university. So he was asked to leave.'

Calabrio would have left his story there, but Benny didn't let him.

'Did he?' she asked.

'Eventually, yes. There were more arguments, threats to the house of dons, flashes of...' He trailed away, and then picked up. 'He threatened to burn the library. Oh, he wasn't much of an academic by the end.' His speech had slowed; he was now very quiet indeed.

'I think he hated me in particular.'

Barr hated Calabrio, thought Benny; a frail man over a century old, with careful, kind things to say.

'Anyway, less of him,' said Calabrio, deliberately sharpening. 'We've got to decide how to deal with this book, now that it's become so sought after. Tell me, how much of it had you read?'

'Not all of it. There wasn't much time.'

'But you know what it is?' He lifted the book with both hands.

'A treasure hunt. An armchair treasure hunt, with poems.'

'Yes, more or less. It was a fad at the turn of the millennium. There were a few like this, each with a prize hidden somewhere, waiting for a quick-witted reader to see through the clues. I thought the Regal Professor covered their history well.'

'And this one, *The Slight Façade*, is special because no one ever found it.'

'That, and that the book's been so very hard to find. Partly, of course, due to one of the terms of Barr's departure - that we never allow our physical library books to be reproduced. I was always quite infuriated that they agreed to that one.'

Benny was outraged: 'A university agreed to restrict access to their library? What were they... *How* could they do that?'

'It was a disorderly time for the university, and I think a lot was at stake. In any case, yes, that was a mistake, but until Barr dies or changes his mind, that is what we have to do. Although -' Calabrio waved the book '- I think events might have overtaken us all.'

'So now that the book's in the public eye, the hunt is going to kick off again,' suggested Benny.

'Yes, I would have thought so. I'm sure it's occurred to the Regal Professor that if he owns the only reproducible copy of the book, he stands to make a fair fortune from the interest he's whipped up.'

'As would anyone who found the prize.'

'I daresay,' said Calabrio. 'I daresay they would.' He looked at Benny. 'Since you're here anyway, and showed a keenness before anyone else, why don't we read it now?'

They studied the book as the afternoon became the evening. Occasionally Calabrio would read a passage out loud, barely looking at the page - Benny suspected that he was reciting from memory. More than once he picked on a particular stanza:

Where men circled, where swords crossed,
Where Ken and Beck lay,
There others stood and marked their lost
Endeavours at the longest day.

Calabrio read and discussed the stanzas with warm indulgence. He smiled, and the pleasure seemed private, until he surprised Benny by saying: 'I have read the book often, but more often had it read to me. It was one of my wife's favourites,' and Benny let the sentence hang. She had learnt for herself the boundaries of personal thoughts.

The story was short, and their conversation was ebbing after Calabrio had finished taking them through it, when Benny asked: 'What is The Slight Façade? The buried prize, I mean. It doesn't even say what kind of thing it is.'

'No it doesn't, other than that it's definitely physical, and made of gold, and probably not what it would seem at first.'

'Which will make it harder for us to find.'

'Us?' He laughed, genuinely surprised. 'Perhaps it would. But I'm not really sure that finding it is what I want. I quite like the idea that it's waiting where it was left, for someone to stumble upon, or discover by their own efforts. It gives a point to the book, as well.' He held her with a smile. 'Is that what you want? To find The Slight Façade?'

Benny furrowed her face, but tempered it with a shrug.

'Well, yes, especially if there's a race on.' It had seemed obvious; now Benny's confidence faltered. 'I really thought you would too, the way you know the book so well. You seem completely taken with the challenge of it. And it's a quest to find a piece of artwork - I'd even say it's your job.'

'Is it? Then I'm afraid I'm a terrible fraud. I think art historians often are - you certainly need the front to disguise opinions as theories.' He touched her arm. 'But it's all right to want to find it. At least you're honest about yourself, Sarah.'

Benny juddered faintly. 'Listen, Mr Calabrio -'

'I know, I know. I've kept you here for a while, and it was good of you, but now you have to head on and I probably should too.'

'Well, yes, but -'

'That's absolutely all right, Miss Bishop. Why don't you head downstairs and book us both a transport. I'll be heading to the terminal. Not back to New Sau Paolo, not yet. I'll visit some other friends first.'

Benny's mouth was still open, conflicted.

'I'm sure the Regal Professor will make the book available very soon, you can pick up your chase then. You'll still have a head start on everyone else.'

Leave now then, thought Benny, and leave the fib intact. 'All right. Okay. Transports it is,' she said.

She left the room and headed down the stairs to the lobby, where the desk man had finished his shift and been replaced by a serving droid. She decided not to ask it for transports though, because the side of its head had been removed, and a series of hacking cables were trailing from it to a hand terminal, which Salim Barr was using to scan the hotel guest list.

'Change of plan,' said Benny urgently after she had skulked back to the room. She outlined what she had seen.

'Sounds as if we must be hasty,' said Calabrio. 'Why don't I phone reception instead?'

'Tell them to get it to fly straight to our window and pick us up here.'

Calabrio was astonished, then amused. 'Jolly good,' he said, and then into the hotel phone: 'Hello, Calabrio here.' A pause. 'Ravel Calabrio.' He listened, and then turned to Benny. 'I'm not a registered guest at the hotel, apparently.' He turned the phone off.

'Barr won't find us then either. Not quickly.'

'There's some relief.' He sat on the bed. Benny did too, facing him.

'Mr Calabrio,' she said, calmly but deliberately - she had his full attention, 'I think we have to find The Slight Façade. I think that even if we get the book away from Barr, he's going to use his own copies to find the prize before the book becomes public. And I know he's allowed to, but, well - I just don't think he should.'

Calabrio heaved, and then his shoulders sank as his elbows rested sorrowfully on his thighs, his hands clasped in front of his mouth. 'I think you are right, Sarah. About all of that,' he said, and then with a smile: 'Direction in the moral mess. My wife would have approved of you.'

He stood, picked up the book and gave it to Benny.

'There are some things I should tell you.' He had a confessor's melancholy. 'I think the answer is very close.'

'It's local?'

'Within what the author calls the British Isles, yes. But I meant intellectually close. You see, I've known the book for a while, and I think I've learnt something of its style. I think I know which the key passages are, the shape that the clues take. And they're intricate enough to be a fair challenge to a twenty-first-century man.' He put a hand on Benny's PDA. 'But the world has caught up with it.'

'We're cleverer now?'

'I'd be surprised at *that*. No, I had in mind all the databases and research that can be freely accessed, and so speedily. These clues, so labyrinthine in their day, are trivial now. Whereas once they required plentiful general knowledge, generous doses of lateral thinking and a bit of luck, now all you need is a very ordinary piece of technology.'

'A search engine?'

'Yes. With the right understanding of the manuscript, anyone could find the prize today.'

'And you have that understanding?'

'Yes.'

'So,' said Benny, 'where is it?'

'I don't know,' replied Calabrio. 'I chose not to look.'

Calabrio decided that she should conduct the search, and she was deferential as he took her through the story once more, highlighting the passages to emphasise to the search avatar they had chosen. All the way through, Benny sensed that he was hiding a sadness. When he finished, she noted the sacrifice in his voice. 'I had hoped I would have a few more weeks, at least,' he said. 'A few more days before the furore started. Then, if I was far enough away, I could close my ears to it.'

He stood looking out of the window while Benny entered it all in to her PDA. When she pressed the last button, the search took less than a second.

'Its done,' she called.

'Any conclusion?' asked Calabrio.

'There are a couple of alternatives, but I think the winner is pretty clear.'

He came and looked over her shoulder. 'Ah,' he said. 'Of course.'

And suddenly, the door beeped. It was locked, but someone was trying it repeatedly.

'Who's there?' called Calabrio. Benny lunged a hand to his mouth to quieten him.

'Its Barr!' she whispered. The door started making a series of lower, buzzing noises, which clipped off suddenly. 'He's hacking the door control.'

'I'd better call for that transport.'

'But they don't know you here, remember?'

Calabrio had an idea about that,' said Calabrio, picking up the phone. 'Hello, yes, now, this is *Cockers* here. That's right. I'd like to book a transport to my window.'

A few seconds later he turned back to Benny.

'That seemed to work.'

The transport arrived while door security chirped a final, failing note. As they clambered up the window ledge and along the gangplank, there was a pop as the bolt was blown aside by its own emergency charge, and Barr entered an empty room, just as it was filling with hot air from the departing transport's engines.

It was an ancient vehicle, probably retired from military service, probably chosen for its versatile boarding capabilities. It was painfully noisy as it took off, and Benny was only able to be heard again when they were well into flight.

'Barr's going to be on our tail all the way, isn't he?' shouted Benny.

'I daresay, Sarah. He's a tenacious man.'

'And if he gets hold of *The Slight Façade*? He'll trade on the fame and money?'

'Actually I don't think so,' shouted Calabrio. 'I'm afraid he...' His words disappeared in the din.

'What?' Benny shouted louder, but suddenly the vehicle entered a glide, and the noise became manageable.

'I said I don't imagine he values it very much at all. In fact, I'm sure he plans to destroy it.'

The last of the dusk was falling as they landed by the calculated burial site. Benny had made them stop at a supplies warehouse, and picked up a shovel and two good torches. She had tried to secure some pegs and boundary tape, but they were as specialist as they were archaic, and between her and Calabrio they would have to use line of sight instead. Similarly, there was no laser angle guide - a steel quadrant from a pod housing unit would have to serve as a makeshift set square.

'The feature we're using as a reference point won't be here,' said Benny. 'We'll have to measure up.'

She placed her PDA on the ground at its guess of a grid reference, and paced north, and then west, illuminating the ground ahead of her with her torch. She had walked only part of her intended distance when she stopped.

'What's wrong?' called Calabrio.

'It can't be here,' replied Benny. She tracked her torch along the ground to show him. The earth she was standing on changed, suddenly, to concrete - old decaying, battered concrete that had

broken under the pressure of the creeping foliage around it. It had to be at least contemporary with the book, probably older. 'It was buried in soil, right?'

'Quite definitely. I recall that your search turned up an alternative, though. I suggest we try there'

The second location was some distance away, and they were tired, but the transport rattled too much for sleep. Benny stared through the window at the lights passing outside. Calabrio sat with his chin on his chest.

Some way into the journey, he broke the silence and said: 'Miss Bishop, there is something weighing on me that I should tell you.'

Benny was sleepy and still distant. 'Oh? What?'

'It's about Barr. Myself, and Salim Barr. You see, I was rather responsible in the events that turned his personality. I have some culpability there.'

Benny faced him, intrigued. 'What did you do?'

'I embarrassed him.' Benny squinted - this seemed trivial, but Calabrio carried on entirely seriously. 'Quite publicly, I'm afraid. I had suspected it would a little, but I hadn't taken into account a young man's vanity.' He halted, as if to reassess the events.

Benny wanted to keep this conversation alive: 'I can see that he's vain,' she said.

'Oh, yes, he always had a tendency towards conceit. It's arrogance really, controlling the things that were important to him. And so much worse now, of course, it's become dangerous. I think I had a hand in heightening that, stabbing at his pride.' He looked at Benny apologetically. 'It humiliated him.'

'So,' and Benny could only repeat herself, 'what did you do?'

'Do you mind if I don't tell you? It had such repercussions then, it seems unfair to repeat the story now, when it doesn't matter at all.'

'Okay,' said Benny, although it wasn't. 'Why did you want to tell me though?'

'In a funny way, it's related to this book. I thought you should know that if he's after it, being with me would place you at risk too.'

'I don't mind that.' Calabrio raised an eyebrow, so Benny continued: 'Really, a bit of risk is all right. And for what it's worth, I don't think anything you can have done will have been bad enough to turn him. He seems to be the seed of his own troubles.'

'Thank you,' said Calabrio. 'You're like my wife. Forgiving.'

Benny thought it a strange compliment, but was still touched.

Nothing she could think of to say wouldn't have cheapened the remark, and they slipped into silence again.

An hour further into the journey, Calabrio said: 'We seem to be travelling fairly slowly. For a vehicle like this.'

'I think the traffic sensor has stopped working properly.'

They both knew that this almost certainly meant that it was being jammed. Neither said it aloud.

The area around the second burial site was protected from most visitors and all vehicles, and they landed a hundred yards outside. It was well after midnight and entirely dark. They couldn't risk access until the dawn.

'We may as well sleep, if we can,' said Calabrio. He did so easily; Benny's weariness took longer to overcome her nerves, but the day had been jarring, her energy was spent, and her senses gave way too.

She woke with a breeze on her face. The door of the transport was open, and a faint purple-blue light was drawing up at the horizon. Benny pulled herself upright - it had been a couple of hours at most since she had fallen asleep, and she wasn't so much disorientated as under-alert and thinking slowly.

So it was a full minute before she realised that Calabrio was missing, and so was the book.

Benny had searched the area around the transport, looked over the verge, and checked her PDA for messages, but there was no sign of Calabrio. The transport log told her that the door had opened about twenty minutes before she woke, but the cameras on both sides were off, and there were no other records that she could find. Calabrio had taken them to an empty, soundless plain, and without him Benny felt very alone.

'There's still a job to do, Benny' she muttered. She picked up her equipment, and walked to the boundary of the protected area. There were motion detectors, but no fence. She took a single, careful step over the chalk border that had been cut out from the grass. Nothing happened. If she had triggered an alarm, it was silent.

She narrowed down the suspected site area quickly, and then started looking for the features that the search engine had identified. She had to dig in the shadow of one of them - it had a distinctive shape and she soon found it. She also found, at the correct distance but on the wrong side from it, a hole, three feet deep, and mounds of

disrupted earth around it. It was fresh, probably less than an hour old.

'Someone's nearly got this right,' said Benny. She looked around. There were plenty of places a figure could hide himself, but Benny had been careful on her way here; she was as sure as she could be that she was unwatched. Her predecessor must have given up, or they would still be here digging. Anyway, there was no way of scanning the area any better. She might as well get started.

She walked to the other side of the landmark, measured a pace, and started to dig. She was careful, noting the composition and packing of the soil at each stage, wary of disturbances or peculiarities.

At her fourth shovel load, she heard someone talk.

'That makes sense, I suppose.'

She knew the voice, and turned slowly to face it. Salim Barr was standing five feet behind her, his absurd coat tails flying over his legs in the breeze. Once again, he had a pistol trained on her, this time with a louche confidence.

'My guess was no doubt less informed than Mr Calabrio's, but then, I haven't squandered my life on protracted word games.'

'What do you want, Barr?' said Benny, straining to hide the tension in her voice.

'I want you to carry on. Until you find it.'

Benny turned slowly. She could be clever here, covering over any find she made and convincing him that it was a false trail. She would put earth aside with her first few strokes, ready to swap in when the object appeared. It would need plenty of loose soil though - plenty of hearty slices of earth from carefree swipes at the ground. With her first blow she threw in a vigorous swing deep into the earth.

The shovel hit something with a loud knock.

'We seem to have struck lucky, Miss Bishop.' Barr was delighted, almost convivial. 'Throw it over here.'

Panicked, Benny knelt away from Barr and fished in the earth. Her fingers worked the soil loosely, indecisively, begging for a way to still keep the find from him. But then she touched it.

She had turned up a small lead casket without markings. It was in two pieces - they would come apart with very little pressure - and inside, there would be room for a small ornament. She held it behind her as she stood up. It was the only leverage she had.

'Well, throw it.'

'I don't think you'd look after it well if I did.' There was no plan, only desperate prevarication.

'I assure you, that is not what should worry you at the moment.'

'Isn't this all rather unimportant? I mean, what is it to you if the world has another artefact?'

At this Barr flared with a sudden anger, his voice raised, his whole composure compromised.

'Artefact?' he bellowed. 'Artefact? Artefacts are accidents! Some piece of a civilisation suddenly suspended in a tableau. This pathetic trinket doesn't even have the basic talent of unplanned preservation. A chamber pot hidden in a midden has more claim to archaeology than this.'

Benny suspected she had triggered a monologue with a well-practised theme.

'Proper archaeological relics, they're literally artefacts! Rudely showing lives once lived and discarded. They haven't been chosen or designed - it is so *impertinent* to place a buried treasure in the same category!'

This was a chance, thought Benny. He can really be pushed.

'It's beautiful, though,' she said. 'It's art.'

'What? It's not about art! An urn might have been the most beautiful sight ever to the owners, but once it's lost in ash its only value is as a document of their life. A real, valid document.'

Benny was looking at him, but also behind him. Barely noticeable in the dawn light a figure was approaching; a chance of escape. She needed more time. 'So,' she said, 'this is a valid record too.'

'*This* is a dismal hanger-on to real archaeology. It's a tawdry reward for a frivolous game.' The person was closer now, but still too far. 'It's an aspirant no-mark with a novelty trail.' Nearly there, the outline was moving slowly. 'It's archaeology as tourism: come and have a go! Solve our puzzle and feel clever for a day!'

The figure had reached them now. He was standing to Barr's back, the sun rising behind him, and in his hand a weapon was glinting.

'I had worried I wouldn't catch up with you Salim,' said Calabrio.

'But your voice really does carry with this wind.'

At first, Benny thought that the most unlikely aspect of the scene was that Calabrio was armed. That changed quickly.

'Ravel?' Barr had turned slightly to see him, but still had his gun pointed at Benny. 'Are you here to take something else from me?'

'Oh, Salim,' said Calabrio, 'is this still about Helen?'

Benny's thoughts broke from the gun in Barr's hand and the relic in hers: 'Hold on, just how well do you two know each other?'

Barr laughed, there was glee to his inflection, he was still in control. 'Oh, dear, Ravel, you haven't told your new girlfriend about her predecessor. Yes, he carelessly steals girlfriends, I'm afraid. He took mine.'

Benny reeled; Calabrio's motives suddenly seemed incongruously deceptive - did he have a taste for younger company? It occurred to her with a twitch that she had already slept in the same vehicle as him.

'Just how old is this woman?' Benny demanded.

Calabrio inhaled. 'My wife died 14 years ago, Miss Bishop. She was ninety.'

'You went out with someone twice, three times your age?' she asked Barr incredulously.

'Oh, tell her, Salim,' said Calabrio. 'You're too much of an aesthete to let time go unhindered. Didn't you once tell me how much you abhorred creased skin and wizened faces?' He spoke past Barr and to Benny: 'We were undergraduates together. He's the same age as me.'

'Ravel, *you* should remember that I can kill her in a second.' Barr's self-control deserted him, his voice was staccato with fury. 'Bishop, I think you should stop tinkering with history and show us what you have found.'

Benny sensed danger in his anger. 'It's in a case,' she said, producing it.

'Open it, then.'

Benny tracked the groove between the parts with her thumbnail, pushing the mud away. Then with a single movement, she pulled it apart. There was a hollow inside, enough for a small ornament. But it was empty.

'There's nothing inside,' she said, ensuring Calabrio could hear her.

'It's a trick, then. There was nothing there.'

'No,' called Calabrio, I know the book quite well enough to know that there was something inside. I think we've simply been a runner up in a long race.'

'Someone was quick off the mark from the lecture then,' said Barr. Suspicion growled through his sentence.

'Actually, no,' Benny replied quietly. 'I know a bit about soil. This hasn't been disturbed for centuries. At a guess, it was found not long after it was buried.'

Barr stood silent, grim and venomous.

'Ah, well, Salim,' called Calabrio, 'it seems all our efforts were in vain. None of us will ever own it now.'

Barr said nothing for a while, and then: 'I want the case.'

'What do you think, Sarah?' Calabrio was shouting. 'Should he have the case?'

Benny considered it. It was probably mass-produced then and almost worthless today.

Not valueless though. She looked at the two men facing her from different distances. *The Slight Façade* had been one of Calabrio's wife's favourite books. Barr knew it too. But Ravel Calabrio had decided to respect its secrets. It was easy.

'You know what I think?' Benny's voice was even but determined. 'You want to destroy what you can't control.' She tossed the case away from both of them.

'Since you are the only person here without a gun, I don't have much interest in what you think,' Barr snapped. He turned completely to face Calabrio, and then added with a superior tone: 'Although it seems even that was a presumption.'

With panic, Benny saw what he meant. As the sun was rising, he was becoming more visible, and in Calabrio's hand was not a gun, but the set-square Benny had bought.

'Now Salim, think ahead,' said Calabrio, lowering the steel tool. There was a current of fear in his voice.

'So you came as the knight to the bishop, did you? Well, this looks like checkmate. And in the end, you were only ever a pa -'

And suddenly Barr barked in pain. His pistol fired with a shot far wide of Calabrio and he doubled up onto the ground, rolling onto his side, his arms wrapped around his thigh.

Behind him, Benny was wide-eyed at what she had done. She waited until his cries had died down and she was that sure Barr was harmless, and then she waved her shovel at Calabrio and said: 'I've got this though.'

'So where were you when I woke up?' asked Benny. They were helping Barr onto the transport - his pistol had a light paralysis setting that they had used as a local anaesthetic, and it had left him very groggy.

Calabrio looked pained. 'I went for my *ablutions*, Sarah. I'm sorry it took a while, I'm as old as I am.'

'Well, thank you for coming. Good thinking with the set square.'

'Ah,' he smiled. 'Actually I brought it along because I thought you'd forgotten it.'

Once Barr was on board, Calabrio faced Benny solemnly and said:

'Sarah, I am sorry. I should have said more about my wife. Only, I always suspect it will be a terrible bore for young people.'

'No,' said Benny, genuinely. 'I want to hear about her.'

'She was an archaeologist, actually, on the same course as Barr. A talented one. She loved it, she had books published. For a while she had quite a name. She said it was her second-greatest achievement.'

'Second? What was the first?'

'Ah, I'm afraid I led you there a little. Please forgive me, it's only because I'm proud. You see,' Calabrio looked away, 'she said her finest moment was choosing me.'

Benny wrestled with the silence. 'Good for her,' she said eventually.

Calabrio seemed aware that he had created an awkwardness, and so, with solid composure, levelled a question at Benny. 'Now then Sarah, what have you learnt from this?'

Benny considered. 'Don't steal library books?'

His seriousness broke, and he laughed. 'I dare say, I *dare* say.'

He tried again though, when they had settled the transport. 'You know, there are far better ways than his,' he indicated Barr, who was slumped in his seat against a wall. 'For archaeologists, I mean.' He looked directly at Benny. 'You can enrich the past, rather than keep it silent.'

'I know,' said Benny. 'And I know which I'm choosing.'

They were silent for a moment. Then Benny said:

'So what happened to it? The Slight Facade I mean. Where do you think it is now?'

'I don't suppose it will have been hidden again. It'll have been passed through many hands as an heirloom, or stored somewhere for safe keeping.'

'Or lost,' said Benny. 'It's been half a millennium.'

'It is lost, whatever has happened to it. We're looking for it, and can't find it, and only because it's had an accidental journey of its own.'

'It's a relic now.'

'Yes,' said Calabrio, and nodded at Barr. 'Even he would think so.'

'I like that,' said Benny, and she would have said more, but the engines drummed suddenly as the vehicle rose, scattering the earth across the plain.

A slight facade?

Its not quite lost, although it might not have been found yet either.

Perhaps you know where this story led and, if so, may wish to follow. Better to search from your armchair, though: between misdirection and mistakes, we fear for gardens and fields and unwelcome holes. or endeavours wasted on second place.

Do ask, though, do guess - the prize is waiting for the first to name its hiding place. It must be uncovered by the turn of spring, and we'll let you know if you're getting warm.

slight.facade@gmail.com

Bernice Summerfield and the Library of Books

Andrew Cartmel

High on the plateau, the air smelled of pines. Behind them their plane sat in the clearing, its jets slowly cooling. Spread in front of them, in the late afternoon sunlight, the scattered ruins of the ancient monastery gleamed on the slopes.

They had come in over Rome, flying at such speed that the Eternal City was just a blur of greys and greens, a few fleeting blue mirrors of water, and the multi-hued stripes of fast-moving traffic.

Benny had looked out the window in vain search of the Coliseum, the Vatican, the Pepsi Challenge Arena, or any other celebrated monument of ancient history, but the urban sprawl swept past and was lost behind the plane before her eyes could record any detail.

Two minutes later they were a little over a hundred kilometres south and coming in to land on the rocky promontory of Monte Cassino. 'There it is!' cried Lorris Hunsdon, a plump pale man and allegedly an expert on arcane Latin texts. Peril Bellamy called him Nose Bar because he did indeed have a bar through his nose, a small platinum rod which signified that he was a member in good standing of the CC2C.

Lorris peered anxiously out the window and said, 'But where are we going to set down? There is no landing strip. Where are we going to set down?'

Benny, quite relaxed up until now, was annoyed to find herself

becoming infected by Lorris's anxiety. She wished he'd shut up with his whining.

Lorris was a 39-year-old virgin, which is what qualified him to wear the platinum bar through his nose and declare himself a member of CC2C, a relatively harmless sect whose abbreviated name, rather sickeningly, stood for 'Christians committed to celibacy'. The platinum bars through their noses at least made them easy to identify.

Now Lorris was peering at Benny with wet, affronted eyes, and she realised he wasn't so much anxious as peevish. 'I thought we were going to land *right by the site*. They said we'd be *right by the site*. I hope we aren't going to set down some ludicrous distance away and have to walk *all the way to the site*.'

She tried to think of something sensible to say in response, but Lorris Hunsdon, old Nose Bar, evidently didn't need an answer. He just needed someone to moan to. Or at.

As the pitch of Lorris's voice rose in jagged increments of stress, there was a barely concealed snort of contempt, amusement, or possibly contemptuous amusement, from a few rows back in the plane where Peril Bellamy was sitting.

Peril was a young graduate student who was the expedition's intern. She was conspicuously nubile and keenly aware of this fact. Benny found Peril annoying because she could have Eutemio following her - Peril - around like a dog with his tongue hanging out.

The plane trembled in sudden exciting premonition of descent. Benny glanced out her window as Jones, the pilot, brought them in a slow majestic circle around the rocky green-clad scarp of Monte Cassino. Benny could make out the jumbled pale mounds of the ruins and then individual stones and individual trees, tall shaggy conical pines clustered in the late afternoon sunlight. Benny thought they looked cool and green and knew they would smell wonderful. Up here in the plane the air was canned, recycled, synthetic.

They were rapidly losing altitude in a smooth steady spiral. 'No landing strip at all,' moaned Lorris. 'We can't possibly put down there. I told them they should give us a helicopter, not this infernal contraption.'

'Helicopter?' cackled Eutemio. His white teeth flashed in a mocking grin. 'This so-called contraption is better than any helicopter, Mr Hunsdon. Wait until you see what she can do.'

Indeed, 'she' proceeded to perform a startling manoeuvre. Coming in to land, the plane slowed in a sudden powerful, smooth

deceleration. The sunshine vanished from Benny's face and she looked out the window to see the wings *twisting up*, their angular shadow rising over her face.

The tree-clad hill loomed swiftly closer in a smooth rush as Benny worked out what was happening. By the bizarre feat of suddenly twisting its wings and angling its nose sharply upwards, the plane was arresting its fall. It was the behaviour of a bird delicately alighting on a branch.

Well, fairly delicately. The glass of mint tea in Dr Shenstone's hand slopped brown liquid on her sleeve. 'Steady on!' she said, licking at her wrist. 'They could have given us a bit of warning. Good job it wasn't hot. The tea, I mean.' Dr Shenstone was a small middle-aged woman who, in an age when corrective eye surgery was near universal, affected wire-rimmed glasses. But her standing at the top of her profession allowed her the leeway for any number of such small eccentricities. Shenstone shot a reproachful look at the front of the plane where the expedition's sponsor and his wife sat facing each other in generously spaced luxury leather seats.

'You see, it lands *like a bird*,' said Eutemio, making elaborate hand gestures to demonstrate the principle. 'As the nose of the plane rises, the tail boom drops to maximise drag.' And he proceeded to drone on in this vein.

Eutemio was olive-skinned, with tightly cropped hair that was like a thick curling cap of black wire. Benny admitted to herself she wanted to touch this hair. Eutemio also had a nice smile, when he smiled, which was often. But he had an annoying tendency to over-explain things, as was currently being evidenced by his droning account of the plane's landing technology. At times like this he displayed a kind of bouncing exuberance that Benny rather unfairly thought of as high-functioning autism on amphetamines. Admittedly she tended to think this most often when Eutemio was drooling over Peril Bellamy.

It probably made Eutemio a good archaeologist, though - the high-function autism, not the drooling. If you found something valuable emerging out of the loam at a dig you wanted someone who was almost pathologically fussy to document and oversee every step of its exhumation. Benny had never worked with Eutemio before, but she knew his reputation. And he had to be pretty good to merit inclusion on this team. They all had to be.

The wings were at their maximum tilt now, Benny's face in shadow, as they swept down towards the rocky outcrops of the hill and

descended with a final drop and the gentlest of jolts into a precision stop.

They had landed. The plane perched securely on thick grass in a shadowed clearing among the tall green pines.

Through the plane's windows the ruins of the monastery were visible, stark against the hot blue sky.

Eutemio made some more elaborate hand gestures, continuing his prolix account of the plane's technology. Benny ignored him, watching Daltry, who seemed quietly amused. Benny liked Daltry as well as you could a man who was your boss. Or not your boss exactly. The fact that he was the sponsor of the expedition gave him a different, more complicated and potentially more annoying air of authority. But Benny did like him. The little man had an air of quiet competence.

As the man bankrolling this expedition he needed to be wealthy and he was indeed rumoured to be vastly, obscenely, unimaginably wealthy.

Which made his wife, Eileen, all the more incomprehensible. You'd think that a man of Daltry's wealth and apparent intelligence would have married someone astonishingly beautiful or sexy or witty or intelligent or at the very least agreeable. But Eileen Daltry was a giant shrew of a woman with a penchant for pale floral dresses as big as circus tents.

'When it lands it perches upright, *also like a bird,*' concluded Eutemio. But by now no one was listening to him. Bernice had long ago concluded that Eutemio was a bore, though cute.

No one was listening to him because they were all busy gathering their bags and filing into the narrow aisle that led between the seats to the exit at the rear of the plane. Benny brushed against Peril Bellamy as she reached for her bags, and she caught a hint of the girl's perfume, a spicy, almost musky waft which somehow suited her.

Outside, Benny breathed the fresh air, smelling of pines and sunlight. She looked up at the monastery, or what was left of it, as Dr Shenstone and the Daltrys went off to inspect the entrance to the library, which was apparently located some 120 metres south west of the monastery.

Eutemio went with them, taking the explosive charges.

Benny and Peril and Lorris remained by the plane, Peril sitting fanning herself lazily in the shadow of the plane's wing, Benny reclining on the grass reading a paperback edition of Gibbons, and

Lorris pacing around listening to a webcast on something to do with Christianity, celibacy or probably both, for the following hour. It was quiet except for the singing of the crickets and their idyll was only interrupted when Jones the pilot bid them farewell. Unfolding a set of hang-gliding wings and strapping them to his back, he launched himself off the hilltop and flew himself down to the town below, where a nice clean hotel room awaited him.

He waved goodbye as he floated off into the clear air.

'Bye bye,' said Peril, waving as she lounged in the shade of the wing. 'He couldn't get away from us quickly enough, could he?'

'I guess there aren't many things more boring than a bunch of archaeologists talking about archaeology,' said Benny.

'I'm amazed he left the plane here.' Peril squinted up at the cooling metal bulk of the craft. 'I mean, we might *hijack* it or something.'

Lorris blinked his wet eyes at her. 'Who's going to do that?'

'Actually, me,' said Peril. 'I quite fancy a go at the controls.' She added complacently, 'I imagine I'm a natural pilot.'

'You mustn't do that!' said Lorris nervously, scurrying over to join them. 'You haven't been properly trained.'

'Don't get upset, Nose Bar, I was only joking.'

'Don't call me Nose Bar. I'm not upset. I was only concerned. You seem the type who might actually do something like that.'

She did seem the type, thought Benny.

'Forgive me for saying so,' continued Lorris. 'But how did such a reckless - sorry, seemingly reckless - girl get a job as an intern on this expedition?'

Peril grinned. 'Well, I may be liable to take a great big brutal jet engined airplane and totally destroy it, but I am also entirely capable of handling a delicate archaeological find with an almost reverential gentleness of touch.'

'You'd better be,' said Lorris, 'You'd better be capable of that.' His head twitched in agitation and his nose ring glinted in the afternoon sunlight. He left them then, lumbering up the ramp again, disappearing inside the plane.

'Well, he's going to be a bundle of laughs,' said Peril. She gazed at the vanishing figure of the pilot, floating in the warm blue sky, gliding serenely out of sight in the distance on his folding wings, a high-tech Icarus. Benny hoped his wings wouldn't melt. 'Pity old Jones is leaving us,' said Peril wistfully. 'He looked like an agreeable type. Give a girl a few laughs. I bet he has a great time in town.'

Benny nodded. She envied the pilot his comfy hotel. Although she was looking forward to the days she would spend on this legendary hill top, excavating the ancient library, she wasn't particularly looking forward to the subsequent nights, to be spent sleeping in tents. The rocky ground would be cold at night up here under the clear Italian skies.

But night seemed far away now, as Benny spent another drowsy hour lying in the sunlight with the crickets quietly singing around her. They stopped singing in unanimous abrupt shocked silence when the muffled whoomph of an explosion rang across the hill top, echoing through the pines.

The entrance to the library was concealed in the depths of an ancient well. Eutemio's job had been to set charges to breach the seal of this well. And judging by the delighted expression on Dr Shenstone's face as she came hurrying back to the plane, he'd done a good job. 'The well is open!' cried Shenstone.

Peril sat up in the shadow of the wing. 'And we believe that inside this now open well is the allegedly secret entrance to the library?'

'Yes, we have every reason to believe that,' said Dr Shenstone happily, her eyes bright. She was suddenly like a child.

'Oh, good,' said Peril in a noncommittal voice, and Dr Shenstone hurried on inside the plane.

Peril emerged from under the wing and touched Benny on her shoulder. 'If it's such a secret, this secret entrance, why do we even know about it?' The pressure of her hand sent an odd shock through Benny. Perhaps because the girl's skin was so cool after sitting in the shadow. But Benny found the touch strangely unsettling.

She shrugged and Peril took her hand away. Benny didn't have an answer. Someone else did.

'Thanks to my research,' said Lorris, emerging from the plane. He seemed to have become infected with the professor's excitement. 'That's how we know there's an entrance in the well.' He hurried off through the pines. Peril looked at Benny.

. Let's go have a look. Why are we standing here?'

'We have to wait.'

'Why?'

'Orders,' said Benny. 'Protocol. Common sense.'

'You know, you've just named my three least favourite concepts,' said Peril.

Dr Shenstone emerged from the plane wearing an outlandish bright yellow rig, a vest with an attached helmet. She hurried excitedly back

through the pines, a yellow shape bobbing amongst the green, rapidly catching up with the heavily lumbering Lorris.

As the two of them disappeared into the shadows of the trees, a third figure emerged, coming the other way, walking into the sunlight. The tall slim figure of Eutemio. And actually he was not so much walking as swaggering. He swaggered towards them, grinning at Benny with those big white teeth. She really liked that grin. She didn't like the fact that he was now sharing it indiscriminately with Peril. The girl smiled back at him.

'Here he is,' she said, 'invested with the dangerous glamour of having recently detonated an explosive device. Do you find that gets the girls every time, Eutemio?'

'Every time,' agreed Eutemio. He went into the plane.

The crickets had started singing again by the time Benny and Peril had collected their things and joined the others for the final briefing. This was held within sight of the excavation, which proved to be something of a distraction. Benny knew she should be listening to Dr Shenstone, but instead she felt her attention wandering to the shadowed mouth of the well, a neat circular hole with a dusty fringe about two metres in diameter set in the pine-needle-strewn dirt. There was an odd inscription just inside the opening, revealed by the angle of the late afternoon sunlight, its deeply incised symbols blackly shadowed on the honey-coloured stone.

You couldn't help but notice it, and wonder about it. It wasn't in any language Benny had ever seen before.

'Benny, I see you're looking at the inscription. It has you a little baffled, doesn't it?' Dr Shenstone was grinning at her. The professor was a small toothy woman, full of enthusiasm - more so than ever now. Her claim on Benny's respect and obedience was being somewhat tested, however, by the fact that she was still wearing the rather ludicrous rig, the yellow helmet and vest combination. Now that Benny had had a chance to examine the rig close up, she realised it looked creepily organic, like some kind of dead sea creature draped over the professor.

'It's not in any language I've studied,' admitted Benny.

'And it's certainly not in Latin.' Dr Shenstone smiled at Lorris. 'Although we are fortunate enough to have one of the world's finest Latin scholars in our midst.'

Peril leaned close to Benny and whispered. 'Look at old Nose Bar lapping it up. It's positively disgusting.'

Benny had to concede that Loris did indeed look insufferably pleased with himself.

'This is because we expect the bulk of the texts we encounter to be in Latin,' continued the professor. 'But we can expect to encounter other languages as well, as evidenced by this inscription.'

'That's why you are going to be issued translating devices,' said Daltry, the expedition's sponsor, smoothly taking over from Shenstone. 'Artificially intelligent devices that can read virtually any text.'

His wife snorted loudly at these words, as though she was sceptical of this boast.

'Yes,' said Loris. 'When are we going to see these devices?' He made it sound like an unpleasant prospect. Benny understood his distaste. As a translator and linguistic expert he didn't like his expertise being usurped by some infernal machine. 'Where are they?' he said querulously.

'I'm wearing one.'

'What?'

'I'm wearing one,' repeated Dr Shenstone grinning toothily. She lifted her arms to emphasise the yellow vest and helmet rig.

'What, that thing?' said Peril, sounding slightly alarmed. Benny sympathised. The rigs did look a bit creepy. 'We all have to wear one of those?'

'I have them right here,' said Eutemio cheerfully, indicating a bag full of the yellow vests.

'They're state of the art,' said Daltry with pride as they each chose a vest.

'They better be,' said his wife sourly. 'They cost enough.'

Everybody, with the exception of the Daltrys, put on one of the rigs. Peril complained bitterly as she did so. 'Ugh. It's clammy!' Benny hung her own rig over her shoulders, then pressed the helmet onto her skull. It felt softly heavy, as though it was filled with some kind of thick gel. And it was indeed cool to the touch, and faintly moist.

'It will warm up,' said the professor. 'Mine has warmed up already, and now I can activate it.' She pressed an indentation in the breast plate of the device and the rig slowly and quite beautifully changed colour, from yellow to orange.

Shenstone directed the headset of the rig towards the inscription in the mouth of the well. On the rear of her vest, just over her shoulders, the orange material rippled and opened into slitted circular vents. 'As you see, there are speakers in the shoulders,' said Shenstone.

'Yeck,' said Peril. 'They look like gills.' The vents twitched and vibrated and then made a moist noise. It suddenly came to Benny that the vests were full of a thick moving fluid, stirring as it warmed in contact with the heat of their bodies.

The noise came again. It was repulsively like the sound of someone clearing his throat. And then a voice started speaking. 'Translation ensuing...' It was a thick voice, clogged as though contending with mucus. But it cleared with surprising rapidity. It said, 'Inscription as follows.'

Then there was a silence from the thing during which the professor said sympathetically, 'It takes time to warm up.' And Eileen Daltry snorted again. There was another throat-clearing noise and Benny and the others stepped closer to hear what would be said.

'Welcome to the library of dark destinies,' announced the rig in an unctuous voice. 'Every book a guaranteed page-turner!'

'Warning, this is sometimes also known as the library of death - but don't let that put you off. It's because the books are just so darned good. And there's so darned many of them!' The translator was now baying like a demented yokel.

'Christ,' said Peril, 'Are you sure that thing's accurate?'

'No blasphemy please,' said Lorris Hunsdon.

'It sounds like some kind of disgusting huckster,' said Eileen Daltry.

Dr Shenstone seemed impervious to this criticism. 'It appears to be working extremely well,' she said, smiling happily.

They went down into the well, descending the spiral depths into musty air which was warm and dry. 'Odd to feel so dry and dusty,' said Peril. 'I mean, in a well, which should be full of cold water.'

Benny felt a not unpleasant shiver; it was as if the girl had read her mind.

'Never go in empty-handed,' aphorised Dr Shenstone as she led them down the shadow of the stone shaft, dust rising from the roughly hewn steps. They stopped and donned their breathing masks and were soon descending into a rising smoke of particles. The dust of ancient days.

As Shenstone had prescribed, they didn't go empty-handed, even on this first descent. Benny was carrying one of the inflatable mats with her. It was a heavy load because of the cylindrical steel oxygen tank fitted to it. The mat was a bulging silver rectangle, tight under her arm in its protective packaging. The cleverly layered design of the mat enabled it to open with impressive speed. Its purpose was to act

as a giant cushion to protect large pieces of masonry when they had to be moved.

It also provided a soft landing for large and potentially fragile objects like statues, and enabled them to be transported from the site of an excavation. Benny had used one once before, during a summer job in San Francisco. She'd been working for the Antiquities Recovery Section, inevitably and disrespectfully acronymised to 'ARSe', a specialist government organisation subcontracting to local police forces.

Benny had used the inflatable mat to transport a squat, enormously heavy Mayan monolith, hacked out of a temple by looters and transported north, generating large financial exchanges all along the way, before ending up in a millionaire's mansion looking out with inscrutable Toltec bafflement on the cold fog of San Francisco Bay and wondering where the hell all the sunshine had gone.

They'd confiscated the monolith and enough other pre-Columbian artefacts to stock a small museum. The mat had done its job perfectly well, but she knew you had to be careful how you deployed these things. They could open with such explosive swiftness and power that they could take the head off of a priceless ancient Toltec-Maya idol.

Or your own priceless head, thought Benny.

They reached the bottom of the well and removed their breathing masks. It was dark down here, some fifty metres below ground level, and there was a musty smell that made Benny think of spiders. She couldn't see any webs, though.

Eutemio and Dr Shenstone had set up a pair of work lights on tripods to reveal that the well had swollen into a large underground chamber. Eutemio was pointing a hand-held light up at another inscription above an open doorway, a stone arch.

The inscription seemed to be in the same language as the one at the top of the well. Above the deeply incised symbols was a large stone carving of an open book, the two halves of the book spreading over the inscription like the wings of a chunky masonry bird.

While Eutemio held the light, Dr Shenstone's rig translated it in an oleaginous voice, vents trembling in the gel on the back of her vest. 'Welcome gentle reader!' the vest declaimed. 'A wondrous library awaits you through this doorway. A library like no other.'

At the mention of the doorway, everyone peered through the opening to the shadows of the library beyond. Everyone except Benny. For some reason she looked up instead, at the massive stone

book over the inscription. So she was the first to see a rising tiny cloud of dust, the trickle of small stone fragments, and a sudden jagged network of cracks that appeared on the wall at the exact point where the stone book was attached...

'Every volume is guaranteed to have an impact!' announced the translating device gleefully. At which moment there was an intricate and ugly crunching noise and the big stone book came loose from the wall. Amid a spill of pebbles and dust it dropped, hundreds of kilos of jagged masonry in sudden free fall, straight towards Eutemio's childishly astonished upturned face.

In the split second of realising what was happening, Benny took action. She was holding the inflatable mat, and she simply pushed the activation trigger and threw it. Straight at Eutemio. Benny knew exactly what she was doing. The mat would inflate and form a life-saving cushion between Eutemio and the stone mass, harmlessly absorbing the impact of the book.

But Benny made two mistakes. She forgot to release the safety catch on the mat, and she threw it very high and hard, hard enough so that when it caught Eutemio on the shoulder he staggered and stumbled.

Staggered and stumbled, as it happened, right out of the path of the falling masonry. He collapsed back into the arms of Peril Bellamy as the massive stone book hit the floor with a shattering impact. It echoed thunderously up through the well, seeming to shake the entire chamber.

'My word,' said Dr Shenstone, aghast, as the echoes faded and the dust settled.

'Jesus,' said Peril, clasping the shocked and pale Eutemio in her arms.

No blasphemy, please,' said Lorris Hunsdon.

'Shit,' said Benny. She went over and examined the mat, which like Eutemio, had landed clear of the falling book. It had not inflated. Benny cursed herself. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten the safety catch. But no one else seemed to have noticed her failure. Indeed, they were crowding around her, congratulating her on saving Eutemio's life.

It should have been a golden moment, but it was somewhat spoiled for Benny by the fact that Peril still had her arms around Eutemio.

After patting Benny on the back, Dr Shenstone moved to examine the remains of the stone book. The heavy piece of masonry had left an ugly indentation in the stone floor, a spider web of cracks

radiating away from it. Well, thought Benny. Here's my spider web at last.

Peril finally let go of Eutemio and picked up the flashlight from the floor where he'd dropped it. She shone it up at the ugly scar in the wall above the doorway, where the book had torn free. Then she moved the light beam to where the professor squatted by the stone book. 'It had an impact all right,' muttered Peril.

'I beg your pardon?' said Dr Shenstone, her glasses gleaming in the flashlight's beam.

'Your translation vest was accurate. That volume certainly did have an impact.'

'Oh, yes...' A shadow seemed to cross Dr Shenstone's tranquil, intelligent face. 'That is an odd coincidence, isn't it?'

'Coincidence?' said Lorris. 'Nonsense. It's just a poor choice of words by that primitive translating mechanism. It just happened to say 'impact' when it might as easily have used any one of a large number of synonyms. It could, for example, have said 'made an impression'.'

Looking down at the shattered mass of masonry on the floor, Eutemio smiled and said, 'It certainly would have made an impression on me.'

Peril shuddered. 'Don't even talk like that. God.'

'No blasphemy please.'

Peril whirled on Lorris and said. 'Can it, Nose Bar. One of us nearly got killed, or didn't you notice? Our top priority isn't to avoid offending your refined sensibilities.'

'My beliefs are important to me -' said Lorris.

'He was nearly *killed*,' said Peril.

'People, please.' Dr Shenstone spoke in a low urgent voice that cut through the squabbling. She was like a grown-up intervening among children. Lorris turned to her.

'I know Eutemio was almost killed. I'm merely saying there's nothing strange about that inscription.'

'Nothing strange?' squeaked Peril. 'It said "impact" and then -'

'It was merely a random word choice. It meant nothing. The original inscription probably has a quite different literal meaning. The translator could as easily have rendered it as "memorable" or "striking".'

'It almost did strike me,' said Eutemio, grinning at the stone book. 'And it was pretty memorable.' He seemed giddily delighted, which he was entirely entitled to be, having survived a brush with death.

‘Or “notable” or “vivid” or...’

‘I think you’re all missing the point,’ said Benny. She spoke quietly, but everyone turned to look at her. ‘Whether or not that inscription referred to the book dropping on Eutemio, it did drop. It came free of the wall when he was standing underneath it. At that precise moment. Doesn’t that strike anyone else as strange? It’s been fixed securely up there for God knows -’

‘No blasphemy please.’

‘For *who* knows how many centuries it’s been fixed safely up on that wall. And it just *happens* to choose this moment to let go.’ Benny looked at them. ‘Doesn’t anyone else think that’s strange?’

Eutemio shrugged. ‘It was loosened by the blasting. By the charges I used to open the well. That’s all.’

‘That’s all?’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Peril Bellamy. And she spoke in such a strange tone of voice that everyone turned to look at her. She was standing in the arched doorway, shining the flashlight into the shadowed depths of library.

‘There’s someone in there,’ she said. ‘Sorry,’ she continued after a moment. ‘It’s not someone. It’s somebody. Some *body*.’

The entire expedition frowned as one, in a synchronised grimace of group disgust, at this tasteless and tactless attempt at humour. Peril registered the reaction and became mutely sulky with a clear suggestion of an underlying smouldering anger. They advanced into the chamber, their hand-held lights probing the dusty gloom.

The dead man was sitting in the middle of the room. It was a small octagonal room that you entered to your right as you came in through the stone mouth of the main library entrance. The stone walls of the room were lined with high bookshelves, rising into a shaft of cobwebbed darkness whose surprising extent was revealed by the lamp on Bernice’s helmet. The shelves were crammed with the dark bindings of books of widely assorted sizes, mostly of leather, although some volumes were bound in cloth which retained a pale ghost of its various colours.

The dead man was seated at an octagonal table in the middle of the room. The table was fashioned of dark wood. Spread open on it was a large book whose dusty cream pages revealed dense blocks of dark text. Blocks of text which somehow invited the eye, even half obscured as they were by the layer of dust. With an odd reluctance, Bernice tore her eyes away from the contents of the book and looked at the dead man.

He had a gaunt, sunken pale face and wisps of faded brown hair. It was an ascetic face with a suggestion of the intensely devoted scholar about it. Or perhaps even the fanatic, thought Benny. There was the strangest expression, still discernible on the haggard contours of that dead face. An expression of intense attention, still directed blindly at the book that lay open, his thin dead fingers at its corners.

His body was shrouded in a black shapeless garment which reinforced the impression of a man devoted to scholarship, one who cared nothing for the world.

Bernice said, 'How long has he been...'

'Deceased?' chirruped Eutemio euphemistically. He crouched and spread his hand over the corpse's face. He wore a chubby glove filled with the same soft gel that circulated warmly through their vests and helmets. The glove too shifted its colour, but glowing a bright lurid green.

'He appears to have died while reading the book...' said Lorris Hunsdon.

'Way to state the obvious,' said Peril.

'Careful, no one touch the book.' There was a sharp note of command in Dr Shenstone's voice.

Eutemio was still hovering over the body, waving his chubby glove over it in a not entirely wholesome midair caress. The glove changed colour as it passed over the corpse, though always remaining in the home key, so to speak, of its uniquely bilious green. Benny knew this swirl of colour indicated that it was processing data. In the course of his analysis of the body, Eutemio's hand also passed over the open book on the table. At Dr Shenstone's words he jerked abruptly, lifting the glove ever higher, until it positively sailed over the book.

'What,' said Benny. 'Are you suggesting the book is poisoned?'

'It's possible,' conceded Shenstone as Eutemio, obviously a little ashamed of his reaction, resumed his careful analysis of the corpse. Benny didn't think he should be ashamed of his reaction. If it had been her, almost killed by the brute sinister smash of that stone book, she would have been shaking like a leaf in the breeze.

'Oh, don't be ridiculous,' said Eileen Daltry. 'Look at him. Look at how tight his flesh is over his bones. The man obviously died of slow starvation.'

Dr Shenstone snorted but did not reply, although it was insultingly obvious what she thought of Mrs Daltry's opinion. 'Wait a minute,'

said Peril Bellamy. 'Are you saying that someone killed this poor desiccated chap? That it was foul play?' Peril looked at the dead man seated over the book. 'That this is in fact a murder victim?'

There was a rising note of panic in Peril's voice. She glanced around at the high walls of the octagonal room 'And that whatever might have killed him is still present in some fashion in this room. Still present and still *potent*?'

'What I'm saying,' said Benny drily, 'is that I've tested the air for radiation, toxins, and biological pathogens, and none have so far been detected.'

'So far. None have *so far* been detected,' said Peril, a note of almost obscene insinuation in her voice.

'Oh, look, it's not some mystery pathogen,' said Mrs Daltry in a bored tone of voice. 'He obviously starved to death. It's obvious. And none of us - least of all me,' chortled the fat woman, 'are in danger of that. Now can we go on to the next room of this famous library? It cost us enough to get here.'

'No we can't go on,' said Benny. 'Am I the only one who's noticed that there are eight walls in this room, and only one of these has a doorway in it? The room has an entrance but no exit.'

They all paused and looked around at the seven solid walls of books that faced them. 'Well, obviously there's some kind of mechanism,' said Mrs Daltry.

'Mechanism?' echoed Dr Shenstone, a merry note of mockery in her voice.

'Some sort of concealed mechanism to open a concealed doorway.'

'Concealed mechanism, concealed doorway,' summarised Dr Shenstone sarcastically.

'Yes exactly,' said Eileen Daltry.

'Oh, my God,' said Peril. 'You mean these walls of bookshelves might have some kind of mechanism -'

'A *concealed* mechanism,' corrected Dr Shenstone.

'That opens and closes them? Opens and closes the walls? In that case, what happens if we open one wall - the entrance through which we came - what if a wall, probably another wall full of bloody *books*, was to suddenly rise out of the floor, or drop down from the ceiling or something and *slam shut on us*.'

'I don't think that's very likely to happen, dear,' said Dr Shenstone firmly. Why was she indulging the girl? Benny felt a rising fury towards Peril. It was Eutemio who had almost been killed, but it was Peril who was having the hysterical post-traumatic reaction. The girl

was milking it for all it was worth, and coincidentally sewing the seeds of panic in the small expedition.

All of them, including Benny, and very much against her will, turned and looked back uneasily for a moment at the entrance.

'But what if it's not nonsense?' said Peril anxiously. 'Then we'd be sealed in here. And we'd die slowly of starvation, like he did.' She jerked her thumb at the dead scholar perched at his reading table.

Dr Shenstone shook her head. 'It's by no means certain he starved to death.'

'And we'd be found by some future expedition,' persisted Peril with ghoulish enthusiasm. She turned and stared at one of the seven solid walls, the light from her helmet lamp dancing over the leather-bound spines of ancient books, panic quavering once again in her voice. 'Clawing at the walls in a desperate bid to get out...'

'But our friend here is clearly not clawing at the walls,' said Mrs Daltry

'You mean he just died here in sight of the entrance?' said Peril. 'Through which he was free to leave at any moment?'

Eileen Daltry shrugged. 'Just get up and walk out?' persisted Peril. Eileen Daltry shrugged again.

'Well, I still think a wall is going to come smashing down and seal us off, to die slowly and claustrophobically in here, desperate to get out.'

'But at the risk of repeating myself, he's not desperate to get out. On the contrary, he's riveted to that damned book.'

'We have taken the readings of the book, and the body, for analysis,' said Dr Shenstone. 'Are you finished gathering the data, Eutemio?'

'Yes madam,' said Eutemio politely, finally moving away from the dead scholar.

'Then we shall return to the plane and analyse them.' The professor glanced around the small room. 'We shall resume this intriguing puzzle tomorrow.'

'I've already got some preliminary readings,' Eutemio came over to Dr Shenstone. 'And it seems our friend with the book has been sitting here for about five hundred years.'

'Five hundred years?' Dr Shenstone frowned. 'That's impossible. Look at the condition of the body.'

'I agree,' said Benny. 'It would be in a much more advanced state of decomposition if it was that old.'

'But it isn't decomposed, it's mummified.'

'Then it would be in a more advanced state of mummification,' said Benny patiently. 'It can't be five hundred years old.' She looked at Eutemio. 'Your preliminary reading must be wrong.'

'What an extraordinary mystery!' said Peril. 'Now, let's get out of here.'

'The reading is definitely five hundred years. Five hundred and three years, eight months to be exact,' said Eutemio, peering at the glove, which had reverted to a jaundiced yellow.

Dr Shenstone sighed, 'Benny is right. Likely it's just an instrument failure on the part of the bargain-basement equipment we are compelled to use on this expedition.'

'Bargain basement?' said Daltry. It was hard to tell if their sponsor's tone conveyed irritation or sardonic amusement.

'Oh, not that again,' sighed his wife. They turned and left the room, following Peril out. Despite themselves everyone was a little spooked by the girl's outbursts of prophetic doom.

But no wall of books came slamming down and they were not sealed in, and Benny felt a little ashamed, as she imagined they all did during their long retreat up the stone spiral of the staircase. Finally they emerged thankfully into daylight. It was a beautiful warm evening and there was the smell of wild thyme on the air. Benny took a deep breath as she climbed out of the stone mouth of the well.

On the way back to the plane Peril said, 'I'm sorry if I got a little overwrought back there, but I mean, for God's sake.'

'No blasphemy, please,' chirped Lorris Hunsdon.

'Oh, give it a rest, Nose Bar. I mean poor dear Eutemio had almost got himself killed.' Peril stared tearfully at Eutemio, who was not above taking advantage of the situation and flashing one of his biggest, whitest grins at the girl.

Poor dear Eutemio? Benny tried not to grind her teeth

'And also I'm about to get my period,' continued Peril rather alarmingly, 'and I always become emotionally labile around about this time of the month when I'm about to get my period.'

'Do you have to keep talking about your menstrual cycle?' said Lorris Hunsdon, frowning.

'Didn't mean to upset your prissy sensibilities, Nose Bar,' said Peril.

They analysed the data that Eutemio had gathered with his glove, but try as they might, they could find nothing to explain the death of the body in the first room.

Nothing other than what Mrs Daltry had suggested from the beginning... Slow starvation.

'That would also explain the absence of corruption,' said Benny. Dr Shenstone had put her in charge of analysing the results. 'The body didn't decompose because of a lack of bowel bacteria. That's what starvation does.'

'Like a saint in a mountain cave,' said Eutemio, with a note of dumbstruck awe.

'So anyway,' concluded Benny. 'This explains the remarkable preservation of the corpse and confirms Eutemio's original estimate of the age as about five hundred years.'

Mrs Daltry smiled smugly but refrained from pointing out that she had been proved right.

She was also proved right about the secret entrance into the next room of the library. They found it on the second day. The concealed lever was operated when a certain book was removed from the shelf and then the entire wall slid shakily back to reveal, in a descending curtain of disturbed dust, the next octagonal room.

The book that triggered the door had a title which Benny's helmet translated as 'Choose me and find further wisdom!' The helmet insisted on implying the exclamation mark in the title. The helmet also translated a subtitle that read, 'More books this way, you won't believe the books we've got in here. You thought those ones in this room were good, well take a deep breath, baby, because the ones in this next room are even better. Just wait till you get a load of these beauties...'

'I'm sure there's something wrong with that translation device,' bleated Lorris Hunsdon as they waded into the descending dust, the lights they carried piercing the shadows of the next room.

Of course, that room led to the next, and so on. In the next week and a half they found plenty more bodies, some mummified in the manner of the avid scholar in the first room, others reduced to mere skeletons.

Some had clearly died by violence, indeed, some pairs of intertwined skeletons seemed to have expired in conflicts that had proved mutually fatal. One was an almost contrivedly perfect crime scene of an argument between two scholars who had fallen out over some abstruse piece of learning. The men had beaten each other to death with large books.

'CSI Monte Cassino,' quipped Peril Bellamy tastelessly as the team pieced together what had happened.

One day Benny stepped into a new chamber and found herself drawn to a particular book, about eye level on the shelf on the

opposite wall. The book had a pleasing geometric pattern on the spine which caught her attention. But what most caught her attention were the erotic engravings on fine paper at the front of the book. Beautiful illustrations, of yearning carnal beauty, they gave way to ornate blocks of text which Benny's headset translated to her in a low, intimate, insinuating whisper. The book was a love manual, like the **Kama Sutra**. It was full of imaginative scenarios of sensual pleasure. Benny found herself spending entire furtive hours enjoying the book.

Of course she had other work, but whenever she could steal away she snuck back to read the book. Then one day she found Eutemio reading it.

She probably wouldn't have ended up having the affair with Eutemio if it hadn't been for this encounter.

But they were both in a state of arousal from the book and consummated this initial encounter there in the small octagonal room on the small octagonal reading table. Neither of them noticed the discomfort of the situation. Indeed they found that they were so well suited to each other that they couldn't conceal their new relationship. Soon everyone knew.

Dr Shenstone accepted it with benign approval, the Daltrys with disgusted amusement. But Peril Bellamy was outraged and furious. Eventually even Lorris Hunsdon realised what had happened. He hastened to read the book that had kept Eutemio and Benny so occupied. The next thing anybody knew, Lorris had taken a pair of pliers from the tool kit and his nose was bleeding where he'd wrenched out the platinum bar. He went to Peril and showed her what he'd done.

she said, 'Did you read that inflammatory aphrodisiac tract? Has it caused you to explode into a new and unimagined realm of the senses?'

'Yes, that's exactly how I feel,' jabbered Lorris. 'And I ripped the platinum bar out of my nose.'

'So I see. Ouch.'

'And I have forsaken the CC2C. My vow of celibacy is at an end!'

'Well, ah, good for you.'

'And I would very much like -'

'I know what you'd like,' said Peril, cutting him off. 'And I'm sorry to tell you this Lorris, but I'm already involved.'

'Involved? With who?' Lorris's voice suddenly dropped to an appalled whisper. 'Not Dr Shenstone?'

'No, you dolt. With Benny and Eutemio.'

'Benny and Eutemio?'

'Yes. It's a threesome.'

Lorris Hunsdon's voice trembled. 'A threesome?'

'I know, I would have been as disgusted as you at one time, but then I read that book myself and it got me in the mood. First time I ever did such a thing.' Peril smiled wickedly at Lorris. 'And you know what? Benny is *hot*.'

She patted him on the arm in a comradely fashion. 'So you can see, old buddy, I'm fully booked. But don't take it too hard. It's not like it's a missed opportunity or anything.' She winked at him. 'I wouldn't sleep with you if you were the last desperate 39-year-old former member of a celibate sect on Earth.'

Peril and Eutemio and Benny made no attempt to conceal the new arrangement in their personal lives, and shared a tent where Peril in particular made a lot of annoyingly loud noises of ecstasy late at night.

It was possibly this that caused Lorris to snap.

Benny later learned that there were two guns on the expedition, locked in the cabin of the plane. Lorris went to the plane and broke the lock and entered the cabin.

Where he found that one of the guns was already missing.

Lorris took the remaining weapon, which he used to kill Eutemio. Then he lay in wait, in one of the octagonal library rooms, for the girls. A few days earlier they had worked out how to open more than one of the bookshelf walls at a time, so any of the chambers could now lead to more than one other chamber, and the same for the next chamber and so on. This created an expanding intricate pattern of routes through the library. A maze, in fact.

It was clear that at least some of the skeletons they had found belonged to visitors who had got lost in mazes of their own in the impossible complexity of the library. Got lost and starved, unable to find a way out.

But the expedition had instruments that enabled them to find their way around with casual ease. They also had devices that could pinpoint the source of a sound and Benny and Peril used one of these as they hurried through the maze, into the octagonal chamber where Lorris crouched waiting. When they rushed in, he started waving the gun in their faces and making an incoherent speech about how they were responsible for him defiling his soul and forsaking his celibacy and so on. It was a fairly long speech.

And it gave Benny time to move in and get deceptively near to him and grab the gun. Unfortunately when she grabbed it, the gun went off and killed Lorris. But Peril and Benny hardly noticed his passing. They were both staring, stricken, at the other dead man on the floor. Eutemio.

Then more gunshots echoed through the chambers of the library.

Benny found the cause in the outermost chamber, by the entrance, where the scholar sat at the table with the open book. But now the book had been moved. It lay, open, on the stone floor of the chamber. Also on the floor were the bodies of Eileen and Edward Daltry and Dr Shenstone. Dr Shenstone was the only one who was still moving.

'Don't look at the book,' she called out weakly. Benny hurried to her. There was blood on the woman's vest, oozing through a bullet hole in the gel, which was fading to a deathly pale yellow. 'I'll get a medical kit,' said Benny.

'Don't bother,' said Dr Shenstone. She nodded at the book that lay open on the floor. 'The book wasn't literally poisoned.' She spoke in a low voice and she smiled ironically. 'I'd been reading too much Eco. But in a way I was right.' She looked at the mummified scholar still perched at the table, staring at a book that was no longer in front of him.

'Look at him. He couldn't stop reading. In a sense the book was poison after all. A poison of the mind. It got him. And it got me.' She coughed softly and looked at the Daltrys. 'It got all of us. You see, it's a fascinating book.'

'You mean you read it?' said Benny, shocked.

'Yes. It was along the lines of *The Decameron* or *Canterbury Tales*. A series of brilliant and cutting satires, sardonic, witty, deftly wrought... altogether irresistible.'

She coughed again and now there was blood on her lips. But she clenched Benny tight so she couldn't go for help. 'The one I read was about a scholar - a scholar of genius - who was being held back by a vulgar wealthy merchant and his wife. The scholar was beholden to them because they allowed his studies to continue, and they never allowed the scholar to forget it.' Dr Shenstone's voice trembled.

'Stop talking,' said Benny. 'I'm going for the med kit.'

'No listen. I have to warn you.' The note of urgency in her voice froze Benny where she stood. 'The story affected me profoundly and I put the book down, shaken, leaving it open at that page, the end of the story - and the beginning of another.' She looked at Benny.

'And Eileen Daltry found it, and she read the *next* story, and forced

her husband to read it. The story was of a long-suffering couple who were being swindled by an arrogant servant.' Dr Shenstone looked with hatred at the big immobile body of Mrs Daltry. 'This servant was lazy, failing to do an honest job and robbing them every chance she got.' She turned her eyes to Benny and then to the walls of books around her. 'You see the way it works? This library has evolved to deliver the most compelling information. The perfect text at the perfect moment to elicit the maximum stimulation. Of course, this is a condition all libraries aspire to. It's what they're designed for. But this is... too perfect. It goes right for people's most sensitive spots and stimulates them to the maximum degree. So it is ultimately lethal. You remember that inscription on the well? That warning was correct. This library is death to anyone who enters.'

She nudged the book with her foot. 'This volume is particularly diabolical in its conceit. It's the sequence. The sequence of stories is fiendishly perfect. After it fells each victim, the book is left open at the next story. And that story is keyed by some extraordinary stroke of fate to be the perfect one to destroy the next reader.' Dr Shenstone's eyes pleaded. 'Benny whatever you do, don't look at the book. It will be open to the one, the perfect story designed to kill you.'

Suddenly Benny could sense the presence of the book, on the floor behind her. As though it was glowing with a strange heat. She was almost irresistibly drawn to look at it. But with a great effort of will she turned away and looked at Dr Shenstone instead. There were tears in the eyes of both the women. 'Thank you,' said Benny softly. 'It must have been terrible. Was it Mrs Daltry who shot you?' Benny frowned as a thought occurred to her. She looked at the bodies. 'But why did she then shoot her husband?'

'Oh, no - it was me, dear.'

'You?' Benny turned to Dr Shenstone.

'That story about the scholar who was treated with contempt by his patron... It just got to me. Got under my skin. Made me snap.' Shenstone shrugged. 'And I had access to the guns in the plane so I took one and I shot them. Both of them. Poor Mr Daltry and her.'

Dr Shenstone stared up at Benny with a mad gleam in her eye. 'Her blubber didn't save her,' she said, and then she died.

Peril came in. She saw the bodies, then she saw the book on the floor, as though her eyes were drawn to it.

'Don't look at it,' said Benny urgently. 'Let's get out of here.'

With Peril's unexpectedly adroit assistance, Benny rigged some charges and re-sealed the mouth of the well, closing the entrance to the library, hopefully forever. Then they hurried back to the plane.

Jones the pilot was waiting there, lounging in the shade of the wing, having just returned from his relaxing sojourn in a luxury hotel in town.

He smiled at Peril and Benny.

'Did I miss anything?' he said.

Postcards from the Edge of Reason

Andy Owens

Beacon Dock - 7 April, 9:37 hrs

You find me cadging a lift to Beacon to cover the planet's second annual election. Such is the fate of a dubiously qualified fugitive - taking whatever dirty jobs pay the bills. On landing, the press corps are hurried to safety by air stewards who do their best to maintain their fixed smiles and hairsprayed quiffs while constantly reassuring us that, although Beacon Dock has not been subjected to Enemy attack for almost a week, it may be an idea to get to the briefing lounge as fast as our legs can and will carry us.

The taking of Beacon from the Enemy was depicted as an aggressive, morale-boosting operation that would allow our forces to take advantage of the planet's rapid orbit to establish a military stronghold, thus providing far-reaching reconnaissance and acting as a springboard for future offensive and defensive strategies. Hawks claimed that the assault on Beacon was the largest ever scrambled. Nevertheless, victory was hard won, casualty figures tallied around the 2,500,000 mark in the eight months it took to capture the planet.

The victory was widely broadcast. However, the almost immediate and enormous retaliation from the Enemy was not. In fact, our forces based on Beacon have been so occupied over the past two years in defending their precarious foothold, that they've been unable to

galvanise operations and take advantage of the planet's potential. We are informed that the mounting casualties and costs of maintaining the occupation will be dwarfed by the tactical advantage garnered by the Enemy if it is retaken.

So who wants the unenviable job of running the show? The three-horse race was recently cut to two when last year's winner was killed on the final furlong. Last week, Baroness Carling's hovercade was hit during a flesh-pressing tour of the planet, leaving the old warhorse Wing Commander Lionel 'Flash' Goulden, and Beacon's first non-military runner and outside bet, Nathaniel Spalding, to see who has the most legs.

Wing Commander Lionel 'Flash' Goulden, 58, was the firm favourite even before Baroness Carling and her entourage were lost. Goulden has the backing of the military populace and believes his team have all the answers to turn Beacon into the catalyst for a victorious endgame. Goulden enjoyed a brief but decorated career in the Aero-Astronautic Service. Injuries incurred evacuating workers from a collapsing ozone rig after his canopy had been shattered resulted in a desk job in Engagement Logistics. It was during this time that he led research into the LOCUST Drones which proved so effective in driving the Enemy out of the Alpha and Beta Caprisis regions.

So, what of Goulden's opponent? Nathaniel Spalding, 47, has found his popularity growing as the ripples of discontent amongst the civilian inhabitants of Beacon have bulged into a groundswell. Spalding started life as an apprentice circus gymnast. This particular career path was cut short by what was initially taken as a complete lack of aptitude, talent or coordination, but later diagnosed as an imbalance in the young Spalding's inner ear. The Big Top's loss was Phys Rehab's gain, as Spalding went on to become a yoga teacher and subsequently, an accomplished physiotherapist and bionic-prosthetic nurse, dealing with the severely injured and disabled for many years. It was working with these shattered lives that drove Spalding to take a political stand on Beacon. Unlike Wing Commander Goulden, who has played his policy cards pretty close to his chest, Spalding has made no secret of his course of action - relinquishing Beacon to the Enemy as an act of peace and a means of opening a dialogue for a peaceful resolution to the war. By all accounts, a risky gamble, even for a one-time tightrope walker.

* *

After a short air-raid briefing, we are given our Evac Packs and the directions to the bar should we require some Dutch Courage, directions which most of the press corps follow with aplomb. I decide to leave the safety of filtered coffee and filtered oxygen to hail a connection to Goulden's campaign headquarters, via a brief stop at the Vollo Hotel to drop my luggage off.

As I enter the dock's gallery, I'm given my first opportunity to see Beacon from ground level. The scars of war are immediately apparent. For protection, every structure is built almost entirely underground, only invading the skyline for a few feet at most. The vaporous sky, lesioned with heavy polluted clouds, looks like a diseased lung turned inside out. The landscape is bruised with craters and fractured skeletal metal ruins that resemble giant hands reaching from their graves. The angry growl of high-power turbines alerts me to the arrival of my transfer, of which two rather striking factors grab my attention. One, the taxi is a Mk I Land Shark, a model long abandoned by shuttle companies due to the volume of neck injuries incurred by passengers. And two, this is the most heavily armoured Mk1 Land Shark I have ever seen.

As I board, the pilot immediately gives me a sick bag. 'Welcome to Terra Firma Taxis. My name's Holly and I'll be your pilot. We won't be taking the scenic route or stopping to appreciate the sights, cos the Enemy love taking pot-shots at civvie transports. A moving target's harder to hit and all that...'

The pilot's warm smile takes the sting out of this information, and the horrifying speed at which we leave the docks at least stops the full weight of what she said from really sinking in. In fact, the nauseating g-force inflicted on my body means it takes a good couple of minutes to muster a thought process that doesn't involve wanting my mother. Once I have settled into the ordeal - and despite the disorientating speed my digestive system tells me we are travelling at - I ask Holly if she intends to vote in the forthcoming election.

'Spalding all the way. Goulden and his batty old sod of a father are in for a shock. No self-respecting civvie's gonna vote them in! We weren't told how dangerous this place was gonna be. Driving a cab in this place is like being a test pilot without the ejector seat or job satisfaction. My husband died when the freight yards were hit, and I'd take me and my kids on the first ship out of here if I could afford it, or even if I could afford tickets for them.'

So you feel that you were lied to?

As soon as I have asked this question, we slalom through a particularly hairy chicane and I begin first-name terms with my sick bag.

'Oopsy daisy,' Holly says cheerfully. Then, 'Maybe... or maybe they just didn't care if what they said turned out to be a lie. If you're a soldier, you're paid to believe in their lies and to serve them. Where's my medal? That's why I won't be voting for that toffee-nosed git! And you can quote me on that... Do you need another bag?'

As I disembark at Kelly Airbase, Holly presses a flyer into my hand and informs me that a benefit concert for Spalding is taking place in the evening. I accept the invite, complimentary wet wipes and breath mint.

**Goulden campaign headquarters Kelly Air Base
– 7 April, 11:55 hrs**

Goulden campaign HQ is situated in a converted bunker on Beacon's smallest airbase. To give the whole affair some pep, banners ('The Final Push to Victory,' 'Vote for Victory', etc.) and bunting have been hung to make the thousands of square metres of grey concrete more inspiring. Goulden's father, Commodore 'Jumping' Jack 'Flash' Goulden is circling the various packs of media with his guide dog and a dour-looking aide with appalling posture, probing every newsman and woman with questions and cursory sniffing from said canine. As the trio bear down on me, I hope they don't look or sniff at my credentials too attentively. For the record, reports of Commodore Goulden having the charm of an in-growing hair prove to be wildly discourteous to wayward follicles.

Comm Goulden: 'Name?'

Summerfield, Bernice (For some reason I find myself answering like a freshly shorn grunt).

Comm Goulden: 'Woman, eh? The toilets are over there if you need them. Richards, point at the toilet door for me!'

And with this, the aide looks up, fingers his glasses onto the bridge of his nose, and sheepishly raises his clipboard towards a door over his right shoulder. The battle-damaged old buzzard then edges forward just enough to invade my personal space and allow his dog to perform a nasal biopsy on me from the knees down. Commodore Goulden's ruddied nose looks like an overripe strawberry, with pores

wide enough to lodge a chopstick in were they not already occupied by cactus-like hairs.

Comm Goulden: 'Excuse Patricia, I left my optic prosthetics on the Tyrus satellite, had to call the old bitch back into service. Who do you work for, soldier?'

Met News.

Comm Goulden: 'Never heard of it. Must be one of the civvie rags. Suppose you're here to put a smug little spin on my son's speech today, eh? Good luck. The policies are top draw, they *will* lead us to the Promised Land. Victory! You don't win wars by retreating, and you certainly don't win battles by surrendering the higher ground. If that trampolining wet nurse had ever fought for anything in his life, he'd know that. Come on, Patricia - let's get you a drink.'

Goulden Sr, Patricia and Richards continue their inspection of every reporter in the room. The turnout is mainly planetary media and gormless cadets roped in to cheers, jeers and other brain-dead outbursts whenever the Goulden brain trust execute supposedly innocuous signals from stages right and left of the podium. After a montage of what are deemed to be the greatest hits of Wing Commander Goulden's career (ribbon cutting, cockpit posing, fist pumping and baby kissing), the man himself boards the stage, looking sprightly. He is in full Aero-Astronautic Service regalia, thick silver hair scooped back from his temples. His beaming smile reveals a set of teeth yellowed by tobacco and immeasurable amounts of caffeine. The whole orthodontic scrap yard is framed by an overly elaborate white handlebar moustache.

W.C.G: 'Ladies and gentleman, before I get down to the order of business, I am sure you'd all like to join me in a moment's respect for Baroness Carling and the other members of her staff who perished last week... We must look on the events of the past few days as a test of our resolve. We are entrenched in a war. A war that will force us to make seemingly impossible decisions on a daily basis. Decisions that we must not shy away from... Some decide to buckle and surrender, others understand that the most distasteful judgments can lead to the sweetest victory. I ask you to bear this in mind, as I unveil Operation Woodworm...'

A curtain rises behind Goulden as the flat-topped cadets are worked into a frenzy and Commodore Goulden and Patricia bark at the stage. Downstage, a smooth, matte black, torpedo-shaped craft about fifty metres in length is revealed. The Wing Commander, in all his pomp, relishes the applause then reclaims centre stage to speak.

W.C.G: 'After the success of the LOCUST Drones, we redoubled our efforts researching stealth engagement. What you see behind me is a craft that can carry several compound megatons of thermonuclear explosive, yet produces such a small amount of electrical activity, that it is invisible to Enemy radar.'

He gives the muted curiosity a moment to grow amongst his audience.

W.C.G: 'Eighty-two test flights have met with a one hundred per cent success rate. As few as two craft can take down an entire Enemy fleet. Of course, such a low level of technology does not allow for an autopilot or weapons-guidance system. Each craft has to be manually piloted to maintain non-detection. As I am sure you realise, this is a one-way mission.'

The audience's curiosity has been piqued. Bjorn Jives of Forefront magazine fires the first question:

B.J: 'Wing Commander Goulden, you are talking about kamikaze pilots, are you not?'

W.C.G: 'Well, Bjorn, we prefer the term "patriots", but I can understand the comparison.'

Still mildly peeved from my encounter with the Goulden brain trust, something that might be indigestion but is probably rage congeals in my chest.

Bernice Summerfield, Met News. Who are these 'patriots'? Are you sacrificing highly trained personnel or do they just owe you money?'

W.C.G: 'The volunteered range from the elderly to the terminally ill. The onboard technology is rudimentary, so training can take as little as six weeks...'

C.E: 'Sir, Claire Éclair, Apocalypse Now magazine. What happens if one of these "volunteered" croaks before they can accomplish their mission? By the sound of it, they're not exactly the "best of the best", are they?'

Éclair laps up the kudos from her colleagues as she sits down.

W.C.G: 'Subjects are physically and mentally vetted and maintained throughout training. The issue of physical health is not of huge importance. Conditioning programmes using prison inmates are in the early stages, but have proved extremely promising and involve fairly unobtrusive neurosurgery...'

The resultant clucking and follow-up questions are drowned out by some orchestrated whooping from the cadets, who settle once Goulden has gathered his thoughts.

W.C.G: 'As I asked you to bear in mind, shall we get bogged down

in endless ethical debates, or do you want to lend your support to a man who can end the mounting casualties and debts this war has made our legacy? Richards, lights!

A short film begins, following one of Operation Woodworm's patriots on their crash course. With the Goulden party's secret weapon revealed, I decide to leave early and find somewhere to rehydrate. As I make for the door, I am alerted to Commodore Goulden's approach by the smell of flea powder and Scotch.

Comm Goulden: 'Didn't see that one coming, did you, Summersby? We tear the arse out of the kites, she's up, up and away... then wallop!'

Yes, its subtlety is awe-inspiring. What did your R and D consist of, a light bulb and a moth? A turd and a bluebottle? At least there'll be plenty of money left in the budget for all those neurosurgeons.

Comm Goulden: 'That's the girl! I knew you'd change your tune. Come back tomorrow morning and I'll get you a one-on-one with Junior. Just make sure that dish rag you work for gives him a fair crack. Richards, Patricia's hungry, get her a bowl of mince and a double whiskey.'

Spalding Benefit Concert, S.R.L. Arena — 7 April 7 18:26 hrs

It seems that commuting on Beacon may have its advantages after all. Although the breakneck journey to S.R.L. Arena did involve me parting with more of my stomach contents, Holly assures me that she has got me an interview with Bionic Lawrence, the lead singer of The Sanhedrin, the headline act at tonight's benefit concert for Nathaniel Spalding. Apparently, Spalding and Lawrence go way back, hence The Sanhedrin taking time out of their orbit to risk a flit to Beacon to lend their support. As Holly escorts me through S.R.L. Arena, I am surprised by the level of support for Spalding. Thousands of followers have turned out for the gig, and for the first time since I landed on Beacon, there are no militarily insignia or uniforms in sight. I ask Holly if most of the crowd are simply here to see The Sanhedrin.

H: 'Most of them have never heard of them. This is a show of unity, not just for Spalding, but for all of us who are trying to earn a living and don't know if we'll be going home to our families each evening, or even if we'll have anything or anyone to go home to...'

Holly hands me over to an anxious-looking man who informs me that he is Craig, The Sanhedrin's tour manager, and that Bionic Lawrence is waiting for me backstage.

As I enter the dressing room, Bionic Lawrence pats a groupie on the buttocks, ushering her to leave the room. Lawrence is of mixed heritage: a mother from Baknul and his fathers from Basingstoke (it takes two human fertilisers to impregnate a female Baknul). This genetic mix could perhaps explain Lawrence's occupation - the Baknul are well known for their love of vibration, and his two mouths make Lawrence a natural frontman. He pulls long and wistfully on his morph pipe and drapes a pirate flag around his exposed shoulders and pigeon chest. A top hat crudely daubed with a skull and crossbones sits atop Lawrence's orange, slightly diamond-shaped head. As I take my seat in front of a large mirror framed with light bulbs, the singer removes his sunglasses, and the tinted monocle from the eye where his navel would be were he of purely homo sapiens extraction. These gestures of intimacy make me like him a little more than I had up until that point, though the transparent trousers are a little distracting, for the condensation that has gathered around the crotch, if nothing else. He is your typical wiry frontman, all elbows and angular movements, with long foppish hair and plaited tentacles that constantly invade his field of vision.

Bionic Lawrence, why are you here lending your support to Nathaniel Spalding's campaign to relinquish ownership of Beacon to the Enemy?

B.L.: 'What? Oh, yeah. Well, that's a question in itself, really. He's right about what he says, yeah? He's an angel trapped in hell... if this war goes on much longer, the human race won't be worth fighting for and that... Where's the love?'

Lawrence passes me his morph pipe.

Well put. And how did you come to hear of the campaign? Coverage of the conflict has fallen away since the initial invasion and seizure of Beacon.

B.L.: 'Me and Spalders go way back. He was my yoga teacher - plus he worked in hospitals, so he could get his hands on certain substances that were hard to come by. He may be a politician, but he's a good bloke as well. If I believed in the whole voting thing, I'd vote for him...'

Just as Lawrence's comments are sinking in, Craig invades the dressing room and orders the singer to stop 'arsing about' and get on stage so that he can get the band and himself off of Beacon ASAP. Over his shoulder, I watch the rest of The Sanhedrin stagger past, bound for the stage. As Lawrence files in behind them and trips over his improvised cape, I ask Craig if I might have a couple more minutes with Bionic Lawrence after the set. He explains that this would involve them hanging around on Beacon for one second longer than

they had to, and suggests I try writing to the band's fan club. I give Craig one or two suggestions of my own, but my thoughts are elsewhere, as I size up what Lawrence has just told me about Spalding.

**Goulden campaign headquarters, Kelly Air Base
– 8 April, 10:14 hrs**

I am greeted at Goulden campaign HQ by the seemingly overworked Richards. Messrs Goulden junior and senior are both waiting for me, the younger seated behind an oak desk with his father standing over him, his freshly installed optic prosthetics shuttling between his watch and me. Richards offers me a chair at the large, imposing desk.

WCG: 'Good morning, Ms Summerfield. May I begin by saying how sorry I was to hear of your father's disappearance. I served under the Admiral. He was, sorry, *is* a good man. Mustn't lose faith. I have no wish to speak out of turn, but I am sure your father would support my work here on Beacon. He is a very intelligent man - and a patriot himself.'

Thank you. I'm sure he would appreciate you saying so...

WCG: 'Pish and tosh, we're all friends here. Call me Lionel, please. He was very proud of you and extremely excited about your potential. As soon as this war is won, I will expend every resource available to find all those brave MIAs. Might as well put all that technology to good use. Papa tells me you work for Met News? I commend your willingness to offer a more rounded coverage to your readers. Should you wish to work on a larger publication, we've made quite a few contacts through this campaign. The media always needs those with a balanced point of view.'

Commodore Goulden leers over his son's shoulder at me, tapping his nose with his finger and attempting to wink, an ill-conceived manoeuvre that results in his optic prosthetic dropping out of his eye socket and into his son's coffee mug.

WCG: 'Richards, would you mind taking Papa to sort his peepers, they're on the blink again...'

Richards calmly takes the monogrammed campaign mug and leads Commodore Goulden away. 'Will you let go of my arm, Richards! We're not on a bally date!' rings out around the room's rich acoustics.

WCG: 'Sorry about that. It's easy to get disorientated when you're 104 years old.'

Not at all. Now, it seemed that yesterday, at your rally, you wanted to nip any questions about the ethical aspects of Operation Woodworm in the bud...

WCG: 'I simply know the questions that the uninformed will ask. They refer to the same narrow-minded game-saying. When you have fought on the frontline, you have to make and live with such calls every day. The heat of battle doesn't allow the luxury of a drawn-out philosophical debate. Operation Woodworm gives informed patriots the opportunity to play their part in protecting a society that no longer has any use for them.'

Again, that feeling hovering between indigestion and overwhelming rage. I wonder for a moment what my father would think of his old comrade's plan, then realise that I would probably be happier not knowing.

Can you justify brainwashing people to kill themselves?

WCG: 'These are people who have chosen not to hunt with the rest of the pack, yet expect to share in its kill. We offer them redemption. They will be thankful in the afterlife, Ms Summerfield.'

Interesting use of the word 'offer'...

W.C.G: 'My girl, I suggest you grow up and stop regurgitating clichéd and, to be brutally frank, irrelevant ethical quibbles when the *future of our existence* is teetering on a knife edge. Operation Woodworm will not only end this merciless conflict, but do so in a matter of weeks. I hope that when it happens, you are not too proud to see how foolish you were. This interview is over. Richards.'

24-Hour Workers Strike, Beacon Freight Yards
— 9 April, 05:47 hrs

This is a big day for Spalding. In the morning he intends to give a series of rabble-raising speeches at all of the 24-hour civilian strikes that are planned to take place all over Beacon, and in the evening he will go head-to-head with Goulden on a live planetary broadcast. Election Day is 48 hours away, so the stakes are high.

07:30 hrs

The number of supporters at the freight yard has been steadily growing since the workers who were meant to start their shift an hour and a half ago began chanting pro-Spalding slogans instead of

clocking in. For such a relatively wee hour, the atmosphere is extremely lively. The Spalding party is due here at noon and the expectation is certainly giving the protesting employees added verve.

11:54 hrs

I have positioned myself near the crate that is to act as Spalding's soapbox, which ironically enough, does contain two tons of washing-up liquid. The air of camaraderie amongst the strikers is quite uplifting and I am curious to see what Spalding has to say for himself. Until now, he has confined his appearances to civilian sites which most journalists are edgy about visiting without military protection, so one-on-one interviews are a rarity.

A huge roar rings out as Spalding clammers onto the makeshift stage and prowls forward to address his supporters. He is a slight man with a shaven head and olive skin, dressed entirely in white, and he moves with a vigorous strut that earns your curiosity. He shrugs his gown from his shoulders and clears his throat,

Spalding: 'Brothers and sisters, it warms my heart to see this act of unity.'

A gargantuan bellow erupts from a crowd that now numbers in the thousands. The high roofing of the freight yard allows the noise to swarm all around. Spalding pauses to appreciate what he is hearing before he continues:

Spalding: 'With horror, I witnessed Wing Commander Goulden's barbaric plan yesterday. Has human life become so cheap? Is that all we are - cannon fodder!? Have the decades of conflict that have watched hopes, dreams and faith become an afterthought resulted in this? Sacrificing those who need our support and guidance? Brothers and sisters, Goulden's appalling scheme simply strengthened my belief that unless we act now to negotiate with the Enemy, our race will dissolve into such a morally and spiritually bankrupt gaggle, that it will no longer be worth fighting for. For this reason I propose that, should I win the stewardship of Beacon, I will inform the Enemy that all civilian inhabitants will evacuate the planet, and as a gesture of goodwill, we shall leave behind every piece of weaponry, military hardware and officer, soldier and cadet who has served to assault them. Goulden has shown how easy human sacrifice can be. This is my leap of faith brothers and sisters. Do you believe!?'

The crowd lap up Spalding's words. For a moment, it seems that the roof of the freight yards may be in danger of being ripped off by

the dizzying call to arms. All morning, the underlying fear that the inhabitants of Beacon live with has been present by its absence, now it's found an outlet. I am surrounded by thousands of fractured lives that are united in their fear and defiance - but this defiance is now aimed at their own kind. They know who to hate, and it's the same organisation, the same people, that I've spent so long hating too. There's an orgasmic sort of satisfaction in this loathing, a sweet release.

'Are you ready to act, brothers and sisters? Are you ready?!!'

As Spalding lets himself fall off the front of the stage and be absorbed by his followers, I begin to fight the current of the surging throng, a knot in my stomach that has nothing to do with Terra Firma Taxis. I *am* ready to act.

The Vollo Hotel – 9 April, 22:22 hrs

I sit in the hotel bar, drowning my sorrows with a Kharithiam called ToTo Bei. We have been indulging in off-planet wild turkey and crater mushrooms for a couple of hours (I can't be one-hundred-per-cent accurate about the timescale) which may explain why, despite the fact that the waiter placed a Chatterbox interpretation adapter on our table as well as an ashtray for the mushroom stems, I am finding it difficult to understand what ToTo is saying. I'm sure she keeps repeating the phrase 'plunging sales' - or maybe it's 'plunging neckline'. Either way, I welcome the distraction, and it seems a good use of my time until Holly arrives to get me off this floating asylum.

As I order another round, ToTo heads the same way as the necklines/sales figures that have been concerning her, and falls off her stool. The Kharithiam kindly refuses my helping hand, opting instead for a little nap under the table. Probably best for all concerned.

I am woken a few minutes later to be informed that my transport to the docks has arrived. Once I have lifted my head out of the ashtray and picked the crater mushroom stems off of the side of my face, I pick up my bag, say goodbye to ToTo Bei and place the rest of the off-planet wild turkey under the table for when she fully awakens. When I ask for an extra sick bag, the hand that I receive them from is far too hairy to belong to Holly.

'Welcome to Terra Firma Taxis. My name's Razzle, and I'll be your pilot. Not hanging around for the final count, then?'

No.

'I reckon Spalding just might do it, you know. You don't mind if I have the radio on, do you? Keep tabs on how it's all going.'

Actually, I'd rather you didn't.

The sickly turbine that is my stomach reaches mach two when I ask after Holly.

'She's a goner, I would've thought. The freight yards were hit again yesterday afternoon. Holly was there protesting, cos her old man copped it in the last attack. All those bodies must've shown up on the Enemy's heat scanners or something. Levelled the place. Shame.'

What about her children? Were they with her?

'How should I know? I only work here - oh, hang on, news flash!'

Razzle floors the accelerator and turns up the radio. The newsreader eagerly informs us that his station has been passed documentary evidence that will almost certainly have terminal repercussions for the Spalding campaign. As the tone becomes more moralistic, the newsreader spells out with a less than subtle lack of objectivity, that Spalding abused his position of trust as a caregiver to sell neuroactives and coma psychotropics to Bionic Lawrence of The Sanhedrin.

I want to be sick, but there's nothing left in me. My dad would be proud of me, I think.

Blood on the Tracks

Andy Lane

shelves of the Great Library at Ghazar climb upward, like geometrical cliffs, to touch the distant ceiling. Halfway up, the various books, scrolls, data crystals and other, more exotic forms of information storage reverse themselves, stacked upside down so that the Ghazarite scholars who scuttle across the ceiling can access them easily.

It occurred to Bernice Summerfield, as she watched one scholar remove a dusty bundle of scent-globes from a niche, that it was a particularly overt form of academic oppression. The Ghazarites could access the archives from both directions - the ground and the ceiling. Visitors from other planets were restricted to just half the collection, unless they either hired a local researcher - expensive, and critically dependent on how meticulous the researcher was - suspended themselves precariously from the forest of hooks that previous visitors had left screwed into the ceiling and tried to read the titles on the various items upside down, or climbed the stacks using ropes and pitons.

Or, like Bernice, use electro-binoculars and a trained Noort.

The electro-binoculars enabled her to see even the titles on the very top shelf, right next to the ceiling. Basic image-processing software corrected for the viewing angle and flipped the picture so that the

titles were oriented the right way, while a visual translator overlaid them with a good approximation of their English equivalent.

The Noort had an amazingly extendible and very sticky tongue, and would follow simple orders in exchange for cinammon-iced biscuits. Orders such as 'Fetch!', accompanied by Bernice pointing towards whichever item she wanted.

The electro-binoculars and the Noort had seemed like a good idea five days earlier when Bernice had started searching through the archive. Now all she had was a headache, eyestrain, and sticky fingers from the residue left by the Noort's tongue.

And none of them were what she was looking for.

Aggravated, she reached out to intercept a passing Ghazarite researcher. The Ghazarites were identical to the eyes of most visitors - bundles of walking sticks tied together with dirty twine and covered with cobwebs - but the researchers were easily distinguishable thanks to the crimson rings around each of their dusty, bamboo-like limbs and the meters hanging from a strap around their middle.

'I need assistance,' she said.

The Ghazarite pressed a button on its meter, which started ticking loudly, counting off credits with frightening rapidity. It said nothing, watching her with eyes like bunches of grapes.

'I'm looking for a record,' she continued. 'It's a personal narrative, written in ink on paper by a human being who crashed on an unnamed planet and lived for some years with the natives. It's about thirty years old. It was bequeathed to the Library by a collector of Earth antiquities and curios about ten years ago.' She gestured towards the ceiling. 'It should be up there. You can see the gap.'

The Ghazarite's attention switched to where Bernice was pointing, although she wasn't sure how she could tell. 'Sociology, Mutters Spiral, Earth,' it whispered. 'That particular record is on extended loan to a Jullati historian.'

'This is a research library, not a lending library,' Bernice shouted. Heads and cobwebby limbs around the room turned towards her.

'It is a lending library if the price is right, and that particular record is of no intrinsic value,' the Ghazarite said. 'It duplicates information we already have and provides no new insight into human social interactions. And speaking of price...'

Suppressing a curse, Bernice rooted around in her pockets for some loose change. 'You're not getting a red cent until I get the name of that historian,' she muttered.

I remember a time when there was a tribe of hundreds of people living around the Circle. Now there are only Rober, Marger, Philo and me.

With nothing else to do all day but hide from the Vethkin, I find that I spend a lot of time in the past. I can spend hours reconstructing a particular moment from my time back on Earth: the way the light fell on the hair of my mother; the feel of the clothes I was wearing; the weight of my newborn daughter in my arms. Other memories force themselves on me no matter how I try to avoid them: such as the way my ship fell, clumsy and powerless, into one of this planet's oceans, and the way I had to swim to safety on the shore as it sank. And yet, more and more, it is the memory of food that I find myself drawn to, food like I had never encountered before crashing here. I remember the sharp, smoky taste of chicken, blackened on a trader's coals and dipped in spice. I remember juice so tart that it made my eyes water, and beer sweet with honey and black with malt. I remember lamb rolled in rosemary and cooked slowly so that the meat fell from the bone under its own weight, trailing slow, glutinous strings of fat behind it.

Amazing how things that were once beneath my notice now consume my thoughts. Amazing how many hours I can spend recalling the spikiness of a pineapple, the reptilian markings on a watermelon's skin. That's all the past is now for me: a long table of rough wood, bowed beneath the weight of a banquet; a memory of plenty in a time of famine.

You'll have to forgive me: I have had a lot of time on my hands recently. Time in which I have become caught in the whirring wheels of my own thoughts. Crouched in the dark. Listening to Marger murmuring to herself, and the high, sad sound of the Vethkin. And yet whatever I start out thinking about, whatever philosophical considerations preoccupy my thoughts, I end up dreaming of food.

Marger talks to herself in a low, wheedling voice from the moment she wakes up until the moment she falls asleep. Philo doesn't say anything at all: his legs were burned away during the cull and he spends his waking hours staring at the small scraps of blue sky visible through the thorn bushes, absently scratching at itches where his knees once were. Only Rober and I are left, one of us always out scavenging amongst the ruins and the grasslands for food while the other replaces the concealing bushes when the wind whips them away from our refuge, and tries to stop Marger from talking too loudly when the Vethkin appear in the sky.

More often than not, it is Rober who goes scavenging. He was a farmer, and knows the ways of the land. More importantly, perhaps, he cannot stand hearing Marger talk, so he doesn't mind spending most of his time away from the refuge. She was his wife, before the cull, but now - now I clean her, and feed her, and listen to her endless, meaningless jabber. There

is precious little else I can do. I was once a pilot, then, after I crashed on this world and was accepted by its human inhabitants - a lost and debased tribal remnant of Earth's previous colonial migrations - I became its historian and storyteller, and the few times Rober stayed behind and I went out I ended up returning either empty-handed or, on one occasion, with a cluster of berries that Rober just looked at with disdain.

'Poisonous,' he said curtly.

'How do you know?'

'I just know.' And he turned to leave the refuge, looking for food we could eat.

They didn't look poisonous. They looked full to bursting, and dusky skinned. Rober threw them out of the refuge with an angry flick of his hand, and all I could do for the next hour or more was sit and watch the birds peck at them, scattering juice and gobbets of flesh.

We tried catching the birds, but they are wary of us and their meat is rank and dry. Not that we would let that stop us - not now, not with the hunger perpetually squirming in our distended stomachs - but whenever we succeeded in trapping a bird older or more stupid than the rest we spent the next day doubled up with cramps. Perhaps because they do eat the berries. There was a poem I remember reading, as a child back on Earth, a poem about a seafarer who found himself drifting, abandoned, dying of thirst while surrounded by water too salty to drink. That's the way I feel as I watch birds we cannot eat fight over berries we cannot eat.

Sometimes we eat well and sometimes we eat badly, but Rober usually manages to bring something back for us. A rabbit-like animal, caught in one of his many snares. A wild thing like a piglet, brought down with a well-aimed stone. An alsatian - descended from pets bought by the original colonists, I assume - once kept us going for a whole week, which was about the time it took the bite marks to heal. Rober strangled it one-handed while its jaws were clamped around his forearm. Or so he told me.

The way he looks at his wife sometimes, I think he would like to do the same to her.

I try to leave the refuge for a while, every day, just to get some time to myself. Just to see the clouds cruising calmly across the sky like huge and distant spacecraft. I can hear the Vethkin long before I can see them, or they can see me. I always have time to hurry back to the refuge - just one of many clumps of thorny bushes sprouting randomly across the grasslands - before they appear.

It's obvious to me that the Vethkin are some form of alien race. Perhaps they are the original inhabitants of this planet, or perhaps they use it as a transit stop on their way to somewhere else, but to the tribe - who had lost

all knowledge of other worlds, other races - they were a supernatural phenomenon. They appear in the sky like huge, metallic fruit, heralded by a sound like a thin, lonely trumpet, then vanish suddenly only to appear again a few hundred metres away, progressing in a series of hops and skips against the blue backdrop. Perhaps they are spacecraft, perhaps they are the Vethkin themselves. I don't know. All the tribe ever saw were the objects themselves. Until the events leading up to the cull.

I think it was the Vethkin who caused me to crash. I don't believe it was intentional, but I have a fuzzy recollection of my ship being suddenly surrounded by brightly coloured objects - other spacecraft, I thought at the time - then losing all power and tumbling from orbit. I remember my vision twisting as the ship fell, as though the three dimensions of its construction - possibly even time as well - were being warped. And then I remember nothing apart from the water, the waves and the fight to get to the shore.

It is difficult to tell from the fragmentary records and oral traditions of the tribe whether the Vethkin were there when the colonists arrived or whether they appeared some time later. I suspect that the Vethkin are somehow tied into the decay of what must once have been a thriving Earth colony into a tribe that had lost all knowledge of their origins on another world, but that is speculation on my part. Whatever the truth, the Vethkin had been part of the background of the colonists' lives for so long that the children had made them into part of their games.

There is a circle made of some substance like stone only smoother and warmer, near to where the tribe lived, and the objects appear and disappear inside it. It was not part of the ruins, for it was made of a material that could not be scratched or cut, and the tribe just called it the Circle. It was so obvious, so much a part of their daily lives, that they didn't even think about it.

After long and careful observation - the kind that only children can make - the tribe worked out that an object would appear in the sky for a few seconds before disappearing again. If it didn't reappear instantly elsewhere in the sky then they knew that it would reappear in the Circle itself. There it would stay for a few moments, suspended a few inches above the ground and singing gently to itself, before vanishing again and appearing back in the sky, some distance from where they had been before. Sometimes another one would replace the vanished one straight away; sometimes it was almost a minute before the Circle was occupied again. They could never be sure.

The children used to gather by the lip of the stone, some ten or 11 of them. Lots would be drawn by some arcane process, and one of them chosen. The chosen one would stand on the grass, just outside the Circle, and run across to the other side. If they made it before one of the objects appeared in the

Circle, they won. If not... Well, that never happened. The trick, or so one child told me, was to fix on particular patterns and shapes: an orange and green checkerboard sphere, perhaps, or a series of swirls on a ribbed ovoid. That particular object would disappear from the sky as they watched, and then it would be in the Circle. They knew that although there was no fixed interval between the disappearance of one object from the Circle and the appearance of the next, they could count rapidly to ten between the disappearance of an object from the sky and its appearance in the Circle. For the duration of that count, no other object could appear.

Could - or would? They didn't know, and they didn't care. It was one of the laws of their world, like rain following dark clouds, or an abundance of food following a harvest. They were kids, playing games. Running across the warm stone, lungs burning, legs on fire. There were stories about those who had failed in the past - the objects had appeared around them and carried them away, or had squashed them like fruit jam, or had left them intact but changed in a way that meant they were taken away by their families and never talked of again - but none of them had even seen these things, only heard about them in hushed, serious tones, and I could never track the stories down to actual facts. Legends, that's all they were.

I'm sure children always told macabre stories like that. Even before the Vethkin came.

Bernice had assumed that the Jullati historian who had borrowed the record from the Great Library of Ghazar was actually working on Ghazar. In fact, he (or she, or it - Bernice didn't know a great deal about Jullati biology) had returned to Jullat with the journal. And Bernice had followed, leaving her Noort regretfully behind with a big pile of cinnamon-iced biscuits.

Jullat was a dried-up prune of a world, old and scarred by conflict and by ecological catastrophe. Low cities covered the surface, built on top of, around and beneath each other with a tired carelessness, as if the Jullati no longer cared about how their planet looked to visitors. And judging by the number of handbooks and rulebooks that were consulted by puzzled Jullati customs officials when Bernice landed, they didn't get very many visitors.

She found the historian in an irregularly octagonal office in one of the planet's many universities. The floor was covered by archival records of many different types, from scent globes to data crystals, from dead memory turtles to massive leather-bound volumes. He - or she, or it - was elephantine and wrinkled, and looked as old and as tired as its planet.

'I apologise for disturbing you,' she began, 'but I am trying to find a record that you borrowed from the Great Library of Ghazar. It's a journal, written by a human male on a planet with no name. I... I need to consult that record.'

'Ah...' the Jullati wheezed. It seemed to sink into reminiscence. 'Ahhh...' it said again.

'The record?'

'Ahhhh...'

She waited for the historian to continue, but it just stood there on its eight massive legs, filling the office and breathing heavily. She was just about to say something else when it spoke again. 'I have been writing a dissertation on the history of the Vethkin for many centuries. You are familiar with the Vethkin?'

She racked her memory. She had a good working knowledge of most races, living or dead, but the Vethkin had escaped her. 'I don't think so,' she said cautiously.

'They exist only partly in this dimension, and their home planet, if they have one, is not contiguous with our reality. They have been glimpsed, appearing and disappearing, on many planets, and at certain locations in free space. I have been attempting to assemble everything known about them into a coherent narrative history. It is proving... difficult.'

Many centuries, Bernice thought. Yes, that suggested it was hard. 'And the record?' she asked.

'I noted what it said about the Vethkin, and I passed it on to a Karnite colleague, having made sure I properly referenced it in my dissertation, of course.' The Jullati's skin rippled. 'There was little I did not already know about the Vethkin.'

She bit her tongue to stop herself from swearing. 'And what about the human who wrote the journal? Did he have a name?'

The Jullati shrugged; a massive movement of its entire body. 'Not my field,' it said. 'I did not make any notes about the human.'

If it hadn't been five times her body mass, Bernice would have punched the creature. 'Can you tell me the name of your colleague?' she asked, taking deep breaths. 'Where can I find it?'

'On a sightseeing tour of the Greater Magellanic Cloud,' the Jullat said. 'It will be back in a century or two...'

The children of the tribe assumed that the objects were unaware of them, in the way that trees, and clouds, and houses were unaware. They also assumed that they were the only ones who had realised about the count of

ten between them disappearing from the sky and appearing in the Circle. Not that they knew about such concepts as exclusivity, or fixed times. They just knew if they did this then the result was this. The mathematical logic behind it did not interest them.

In fact, in my assumed role as historian to the tribe, I realised that such knowledge was known to all the elders. It was not spoken of not because it was secret, but because it was trivial. Uninteresting. The objects did what the objects did - appeared, disappeared, appeared, disappeared. The tribe did what they did - grew food, herded animals, had festivals and traded with other tribes. There was no connection.

It seems like years ago that things changed, but it can only be a few months. A harsh winter had given way to a blazing hot summer, and neither of them had done the crops any good. The tribe weren't starving, but there was an ever-present worry over where the next week's food was coming from. Even the fish didn't seem to be biting in the lake. Many times I had been asked by the elders whether there were any precedents in the records, and I had to answer fairly that there were, but not many. As my own stipend - food and shelter, provided as a tithe on the tribe as a whole - depended on the elders, I couldn't help but wonder if I shouldn't be telling them something more helpful.

I was sitting cross-legged on top of a hill that overlooked the tents and rough huts that constituted the village, running through the list of village Elders who had lived and died since... well, since someone first started keeping a list; their names, what rulings they passed, what notable judgements they made, whether they were considered good or bad. There were several hundred names, but it was important to get the list right because there were other lists - the laws of the tribe, the rules that told of who could marry whom, the precepts for greeting emissaries from other tribes - that hung off the list of Elders. Like fruit from a bush. Like ripe, dusky fruit.

From where I sat I could see the Circle: a grey stain on the landscape. Young kids were gathered around its edge, playing the games that other children had played before them. Watching. Waiting. Counting. Then running, running as fast as they could across the smooth, grey surface. A girl reached the edge of the Circle, pony-tail streaming behind her, fists clenched in triumph, and I remember thinking that my own daughter, who I had left behind so many years ago, would be about her age. As the sadness welled up within me, I saw a rippling of the air as one of the Vethkin's strange objects pushed its way into existence in the centre, erupting from the air like a duck surfacing in a lake. It hovered there, a foot or so above the ground, about twice the height of a man and three times as wide. Its orange

skin was furrowed from top to bottom, and it had a greenish patina like old copper.

The kids linked hands in a circle around the Circle, chanting some rhyme I didn't know. They dropped hands and bent down, picking stones and twigs from the ground. Straightening, they threw their miniature collection of weapons at the object. They bounced off its hard surface with bell-like chimes that I could just make out from my position on the hill. It sat there for a few moments longer, paying no attention to them, basking in the afternoon sun, and then it sank into the air and was gone.

I scanned the sky, waiting for its reappearance. There seemed to be more of the objects around than I remembered. For a while there was nothing, and then I saw it appear against the deep blue, hovering over the edges of the village. And then it was gone again, off on its way to who knew where?

The kids reformed into a small knot on one side of the Circle, daring one of their number to make the run. I couldn't tell from that range who it was, although I could see the tension in his stance.

One of the girls in the ground reached out and touched his hand. I think he smiled.

Like him, I let my eyes flicker amongst the many alien shapes in the sky, waiting for one to disappear. Once it did, he had a count of ten to run from one side of the Circle to the other. A count of ten. It sounds like an age, but when your heart is pumping, when the bitter metal taste of fear is in your mouth, when your legs feel too weak to carry your weight, it is less than a heartbeat.

A shape seemed to ripple and vanish somewhere over the corn fields. It was yellow stippled with green, and spiked.

Just as I was about to turn back and watch him run, something caught my attention. Another shape, a lumpy mass of purple dark against the white of the clouds, vanished as I watched.

That couldn't have happened. I must have been mistaken. During the whole of my time stranded on the planet, the rules of the game had never changed. The objects hung in the sky. Eventually one would vanish. Moments later it would appear in the circle. Then it would vanish again and appear in the sky. I had never seen two vanish at the same time. Nobody had. In all the stories, in all the histories I had memorised, there was no mention of this.

One or two of the kids had noticed, down around the Circle. The one who was preparing to run was already off, oblivious to anything else: legs pumping, arms flailing, eyes screwed shut. The girl who had touched his hand was trying to call him back, but even if he had heard her it was too late.

He reached the far side of the Circle with his arms aloft in triumph, and as he crossed the lip the first of the objects appeared in the centre, swimming out of the air.

And then so did the second.

The two objects intersected. Green and yellow spikes erupted through rents in purple skin. A high-pitched keening cut through the air, turning heads in the village and across the fields. The children scattered as the two shapes appeared to burst open, each exploding the other. Enmeshed, they hit the Circle with a sound like the tolling of a huge, cracked bell and listed to one side. Something fleshy fell from them in long gobbets and lay, wet and stark, on the grey material of the Circle.

For a moment the world seemed suspended, and then everyone seemed to be moving at once. The children were running away from the Circle as fast as the adults were running toward it, pouring out of the village, the fields and the woods, abandoning their backbreaking attempts to tend the straggly crops and the thin animals. I scrambled down the hill side as fast as I could. This was a story that would be told for hundreds of generations. I had to be there. I had to see it all.

I arrived with the first of the villagers, and as they edged closer I stood and watched what they did as much as what had happened. The first thing that struck me was the smell: sharp and yet curiously sweet. Raspberry vinegar, I thought.

The ruins of the two Vethkin objects were spread over most of the surface of the Circle. It was as if someone had smashed two huge watermelons into one another. Fragments of what had to be a shell an inch thick projected from a mass of pulpy grey material; something like curds, only firmer.

And then the pulpy material twitched.

It took Bernice Summerfield three weeks to find the cruise liner *Arboline Queen*. Most of that time she spent in a stasis field in her small but luxuriously equipped spacecraft. After all, why use up a small but noticeable fraction of her lifespan cooped up in a tin can, obsessing about the object of her search, when she could be frozen in time? The ship was equipped with state-of-the art entertainment and learning facilities, but they were just a way of distracting her attention from the inevitable ticking away of her life.

She found the *Arboline Queen* stationary in space near one of the Magellanic Cloud's rarest sights: a planet poised, like a fly in amber, between the gravity wells of three stars in a trinary system. The slightest perturbation in any direction would result in the planet slowly but surely falling into the gravity well of one of the stars. The

inhabitants - a pre-spacefaring race of moderate intelligence - were paranoid about earthquakes, atomic bombs and meteor strikes. Many of them were cooperating in a desperate attempt to develop spaceflight before it was too late. The rest were trying to stop them, on the basis that even a handful of rocket launches from the same spot could cause the planet to shift slightly, putting it on the path to disaster.

And all the time, ships from various alien races hung out in the infinite blackness of space; watching, analysing, enjoying.

'It's blissfully tragic,' said the Karnite historian that Bernice had contacted. It was difficult to tell scale from the snowflake-like image on the screen, but she somehow got the impression that the Karnite was small. Possibly very small. 'I do so love species on the verge of extinction. They have a desperate vitality about them that is quite breathtaking. Some of the most affecting art in the galaxy comes from species who are no longer with us.'

'Like the Vethkin?' Bernice hazarded.

The Karnite shuddered: ripples along its many arms making it chime gently. 'Nobody knows whether the Vethkin are extinct or not, although they haven't been seen for some time now. And what little Vethkin art survives is five- or six-dimensional. Several critics and collectors have been driven mad just looking at it.'

'But you have been researching the Vethkin?' Bernice pressed. 'You took a manuscript of an encounter with the Vethkin from a researcher on Jullat.'

'Yes, but not because of the Vethkin,' the historian protested. 'I was more interested in the inhabitants of the planet mentioned in the narrative - driven to the brink of extinction by the ruthless predation of a superior alien race. I wanted to discover more about how they coped with those final days. How they came to terms with the inevitability of their demise.'

'And did you?'

'No.' More chimes, as the Karnite shivered. 'According to the narrative, they were not an indigenous species, just a lost colony of some other race. They had no history to lose, no civilisation of their own to die; just the tattered remnants of some forgotten progenitor.'

'And the manuscript?' Bernice asked, trying to keep the emotion from her voice.

'I do not have it.'

'What are the odds?' Bernice muttered. 'What did you do with it?'

'I sold it to a colleague on this vessel - a Rebeekan. He was

intrigued by the crude and yet aesthetic nature of some sketches and diagrams made in the margins of the material that the narrative was written on.'

She took a deep breath to mask her rising frustration. 'Could I speak to this colleague?'

'Sadly, no. It left the ship at our last port of call. Apparently there was some kind of catastrophe back on its home world.'

There were several million kilometres of clear vacuum between Bernice's ship and the precariously poised world, but Bernice's swearing was so loud that observers on the *Arboline Queen* were worried that it might disturb the planet's orbit and send it plunging into one or other of its three suns.

I wasn't the first to spot it. One of the tribal elders who was bending over, prodding the stuff with a stick, suddenly sprang back with an oath.

'It's moving!' he cried.

After that, everyone wanted to poke at it. I edged closer, fascinated by the way the grey stuff inflated and deflated slightly, as if in time to some distant pulse, and would flinch away if touched. People were leaning in and retrieving fragments of shell as souvenirs. The sense of shock and cosmic catastrophe that had initially spread over everyone gradually but surely turned into a party atmosphere.

In the rush to pick over the remains of whatever had happened - the most extraordinary thing to occur to the tribe within living memory - everyone had forgotten what the Circle was for. What happened in it. As the realisation struck me I took several steps toward the lip and glanced upward.

The sky was empty. Devoid of the Vethkin objects.

Another first.

I gazed at the villagers, scrabbling amongst the ruins of something mysterious, something that they had always taken for granted and yet never understood, and I was struck by an almost hysterical sense of... of inappropriateness. They should have been solemn. They should have been reverent. Instead they were acting like farmers' wives at market day.

I say 'they' as if I was separate from them, but by that time I was as much part of the tribe as anyone else, despite my origins elsewhere, despite my wife and daughter back on Earth.

It was when I saw one of the local dogs sniff cautiously at the grey curds that I had my first presentiment of disaster. I took a step towards it, hoping to shoo it away, but before I could do anything the scrawny mutt cautiously licked a clump of the stuff, not put off by the sharp smell. Wagged its tail. Looked around to see whether it was doing anything wrong. And then took

a great bite. Before it could even swallow the first mouthful, it was snuffling up a second.

One of the villagers, a carpenter by the name of Jonat, was watching the dog. He'd been hit particularly hard by short food supplies: he had five young children and an invalid wife, and as he wasn't a farmer he had to barter his services for grain and then find the time to grind it into flour. His cheeks were hollowed through hard work and malnutrition, and his hungry gaze was locked on the dog's increasingly frantic feeding.

'Master,' he said to a passing elder, 'is this... can we... can we eat it?'

The elder looked over at me. I shrugged: we were in fresh waters now. He looked at the dog, which seemed to be suffering no ill effects. Its muzzle was coated in the grey curds now, and it was licking itself happily.

'Perhaps this is the answer to our prayers,' he said slowly. 'Perhaps God has seen fit to provide food for Her starving children. Collect it up. Fetch buckets and store it in the cool-houses before the sun dries it out. And catch that dog: if nothing has happened to it by tomorrow morning then we will see.' He nodded sagely. 'Yes, we will see.'

I wanted to protest, but I had no grounds. There was a phrase used back on Earth that had also passed into the tribe's vocabulary, but without any meaning attached - manna from heaven - but that hardly gave me any grounds for objecting. Perhaps he was right; perhaps it was a gift from God.

I glanced again at the empty sky. Something was wrong, but the old stories didn't tell me what it was, and there were no clues in what was happening now.

I stayed for a few hours in the blazing sun, watching the tribe collect the grey stuff up into whatever containers they could find and carry it back to the village. By the time they had finished, all that was left of the two Vethkin objects was a collection of shell fragments covered in grey slime; and the smell, so sharp at the beginning, had mellowed to the mellow fruitiness of a good red wine.

I saw Jonat licking his fingers as he piled great gobbets of the stuff into an old watering can. Others slipped bits into their mouths when they thought nobody was watching. No immediate harm seemed to come to them.

And the sky was empty all the time they worked.

I stayed there, as the sun slipped slowly down towards the horizon. The crowd thinned until there were only a few sightseers left. The kids who had been playing there originally returned, amazed that their playground was now the focus of so much activity. By sunset I was the only one still there.

I sat, waiting, a few feet away from the Circle, as the sky darkened into night, as the birds quietened down and as night creatures began to forage

in the shadows around me. Firelight from the village illuminated the sky, and I could hear sounds of a party. I was waiting for something, but I wasn't sure what.

I think I slid into sleep at one stage. I remember confused dreams of fire, and screaming, and of me climbing through piles of rubble looking for someone whose face I had forgotten.

And when I awoke, one of the Vethkin objects was hovering in the centre of the Circle.

It was the largest object I had ever seen; smooth and black, with a faint blue ripple shifting across its skin. Beams of light played beneath it, illuminating the broken shards of the other objects. It hung there for what must have been an hour. I watched it, entranced. Whether it knew I was there or not I don't know, but eventually the beams of light vanished and the object submerged into the air, taking the shards and the scummy remnants of the grey material with it.

Automatically I lifted my eyes to the sky, and felt my throat constrict around my breath.

There were hundreds of red objects hanging like needles from the low, dark clouds. They were positioned over the village, and as I watched they flexed, drawing their ends together and increasing their diameter. They held that posture for a few moments, and then relaxed, and as they relaxed the quality of the night changed. I don't know if it got quieter, or if the wind suddenly dropped, or what, but something changed. Something changed forever.

The objects all vanished from the sky at the same time, and my eyes registered a flicker in the middle of the circle as if they all passed through it within the space of a few heartbeats. Or in the time it might take me to count to ten.

When the sky and the circle were both empty, I ran to the village.

Where everyone was dead. The houses stood as they had always stood, the animals milled around in confusion, looking to me for guidance as I ran past them, screaming, but the people were dead. Most were in their beds, for it was well after sunset. Some were slumped over tables in the tavern or had fallen where they stood in the street.

I found Marger in a root cellar. Whatever strange influence the Vethkin had exerted over the town had failed to penetrate the ground enough to kill her, although it had certainly turned her mind. Philo I found in his baker's shop. I never knew what saved him, but he appeared to have lost consciousness and slipped into his own fire. His legs were ruined below the knee. Rober had been out in the fields. He never told me why. He was the one who cut the wreckage of Philo's legs away.

| *We survive, the four of us. We eat - sometimes. We drink - most of the time. We avoid the gaze of the Vethkin, as they appear and disappear in the sky. We don't talk much, but we all remember. Even Marger.*

| *Rober thinks the Vethkin are looking for us. He believes they intend to off the few survivors of their cull.*

I am not so sure.

It happened the last time I went out by myself, looking for food. I knew of a small pool near the Circle, an offshoot of a tributary that feeds into the lake, where fish tend to congregate. I used to swim there, before the cull. It was shortly after sunrise, and the shadows were long on the ground. I scurried along, bent almost double, ready to fling myself beneath a bush if I heard the lonely solo trumpet that heralded the appearance of a Vethkin object in the sky.

I don't know why I didn't hear it. Perhaps it was too far away. Perhaps the Vethkin had redesigned the objects since the cull. Or perhaps I just didn't want to hear it. Whatever the reason, I was crossing the edge of the Circle, on my way to the pool, when the object appeared. Taller than I was, shaped like a pear and coloured in bright streaks of orange and violet.

There was nowhere to hide. I was less than six feet away from it. Somewhere far away I could hear a sound, as if a brass band were playing out of tune.

I stared at the object. The object just sat there, playing its sad music.

'You bastards!' I screamed, shocking myself. 'You killed them. You killed them all!'

The object didn't react.

I took a step towards it, not sure what I intended to do, but it slowly faded from sight as if more and more of the landscape were coming between me and it. And then it was gone.

'You bastards,' I whispered. 'You just don't care.'

After a while I wandered back to the refuge. Rober asked about the fish, but I told him they weren't biting that day.

I never told Rober about encountering the object. If we didn't have the comfort of the shelter, if we didn't have the constant threat of the Vethkin, what would we have? What would we do?

And now, every day, when I know that Rober is off hunting for food, I walk up to the Circle, and I wait. I wait for a Vethkin object to appear in the sky, and when it does I wait for it to disappear. If it reappears instantly somewhere else in the sky, I do nothing. If it doesn't reappear, I start running. Running and counting.

Our diet isn't too good, despite Rober's best efforts, and I'm not getting any younger. One day I'm not going to make it in time.

Or perhaps, one day, I might just stop halfway.

lust to see if the stories the children used to tell one another are true.

Rebeeka was going through one of its periodic civil wars when Bernice arrived, although there didn't seem to be anything terribly civilised about it from what she could see. Rebel strongholds in the snow-covered foothills near the spaceport fired several missiles at her while she was coming in to land. Fortunately they were intercepted by Government anti-missile laser batteries before they could trigger any of the hidden modifications that she had bought on the black market to protect her ship in some of the more dangerous reaches of the cosmos. With the firepower she carried she could probably end the civil war right there and then, but they seemed to be having fun, and she didn't want to interfere.

The feathered Customs and Immigration officials at the spaceport tried to play down the attack, reassuring her that she was never in any danger. They obviously wanted to keep the tourists and the business-beings coming, but the bullet-holes in the walls and the boarded up windows weren't making their story easy to believe.

The officials, eager to please, told her that the Rebeekan she was looking for - the latest and, she hoped, next-to-last possessor of the manuscript had arrived on the planet a few weeks before. It had given its place of residence as a small hotel in the capital city, too far away to walk but not far enough to take a short trip in her ship. Reluctant to take a cab, she returned to the ship and retrieved an antique Italian Lambretta moped from storage. Wrapping herself in several layers of clothing to keep out the bitter cold, she set off. The journey to the capital city took forty minutes, and much of that was spent swerving round holes in the road left by mortar fire or car bombs.

The hotel had been strafed by laser fire, some time in the recent past, but fortunately a bell-bird who still made a nest in the ruins told her that an elderly historian had been staying there until shortly before the strafing, but had managed to find an apartment a few streets away thanks to the accidental shooting of its previous occupants in a skirmish between Government forces and rebels. She made her way cautiously to the address the bell-bird gave her, having to detour several times on the way to avoid barricades.

The apartment block was still there when she arrived, which was an unexpected bonus as far as Bernice was concerned. The place smelled of smoke and rotting vegetables. Most Rebeekans were staying off the streets, but behind shuttered windows she could see

movement, and the sound of laughter and song drifted down to where she stood. Life went on, she supposed, even though war was all around. The sky was webbed with vapour trails, and there was a reddish glow on the horizon that either meant sunset was on the way or that part of the city was in flames. Unkindly, she hoped it was the latter. The power seemed to be off, judging by the lack of any lights on the streets or behind the shutters, and she didn't fancy trying to find her way back to the spaceport in darkness.

She shivered, despite the layers of clothing she wore. What the hell did she think she was doing?

She found the apartment on the third floor of the block, having carried her Lambretta up the stairs in case some looter took a fancy to it out on the street. She knocked on the door. Somewhere behind it, she heard a scuffling sound. She knocked again.

'My name is Bernice Summerfield,' she called. 'I'm a human, an archaeologist. I'm looking for a historian who was on a ship called the *Arboline Queen* until recently. I was given your name by a Karnite passenger.'

After enough time had passed to convince her that she was going to have to adopt another strategy - one that might, on a less fraught world, be described as breaking and entering - the door suddenly opened. A small, ostrich-like figure wearing a threadbare suit and with a shock of white plumage on its head stood in the gap, silhouetted by a flickering orange glow in the room behind.

'My friend the Karnite,' it said. 'Yes, we had some good times together on that ship. I was so looking forward to seeing the planet poised between three suns, but then came news of the civil war, and I had to return. My family...' It trailed off, shaking its head.

'My apologies,' Bernice said, 'but I'm trying to track down a manuscript. It was written by a human who was either marooned or hiding - I'm still not sure - on a planet with no name. His ship travelled there through a wormhole, backwards in time. He lived for many years with a tribe who were descended from a human colony but who had forgotten their origins. The planet was used as a transit point by a multi-dimensional race called the Vethkin. I'm trying to find that manuscript. I traced it from Earth to Alpha Centauri, from Alpha Centauri to Ghazar, from Ghazar to Jullat, from Jullat to the *Arboline Queen* and then to here. Please, please tell me that you bought the manuscript here.'

'I did,' the Rebeekan confirmed. 'You had better come in.'

The room was bare, bereft of even the smallest scrap of furniture.

A large drum stood in the centre of the room. Flames licked over the top, and the metal sides radiated heat all around.

'The power has been out ever since the rebels blew up the reactors,' her host said, gesturing her to a space over in one corner where it had formed a sort of nest from blankets and sheets. 'I've burned everything I own to keep warm, and to cook my food. I only have one thing left to burn, and then I will either freeze or starve.'

'The manuscript?' Bernice said hopefully.

'My clothes,' the Rebeekan answered. 'I burned the manuscript three days ago.'

'Of course you did,' Bernice said automatically, although she felt despair and a huge weight of exhaustion pushing down on her.

'It was of little intrinsic value. What I had originally thought were fragments of some artistic effort were, in the end, merely doodles made by the writer. And I understand from my colleague the Karnite that there was no sociological or historical information in the manuscript that was not already known. It could provide nothing, apart from heat enough for me to live another night, and to cook a few scraps of meat with. Why are you so interested in it?'

'Because I think it was written by my father,' Bernice said quietly.

'And because, if I am right, it would be the only thing I have left that he has ever touched with his own hands, and the only clue I could find as to where he is now.'

'Ah,' said the Rebeekan.

Together, they watched the sparks and smoke drift upwards from the fire, each trying not to think about the emptiness that, for different reasons, the future held for them.

Thirty Love

Eddie Robson

— her brow was soaking into the makeshift blindfold and chafing uncomfortably against her skin. The bottom of the blindfold didn't quite sit tight against her eyes, giving her a very limited view of the ground as it streamed past: she tilted her head back in an attempt to see ahead of her, but it didn't work. She was none the wiser as to where she was being taken.

'Stop trying to cheat,' Roisa said, painfully squeezing Bernice's hand by way of remonstrance. One of Roisa's fingers appeared in the small gap at the base of the blindfold and tugged it down slightly.

'I specifically told you I didn't want any presents,' Bernice replied. 'You agreed to this. Now, since you appear to have broken that binding verbal contract, I have no compunction about breaking whatever rules you may have invented with regard to my birthday celebrations.'

Today was Bernice's thirtieth birthday, and she was spending it on the lush, green, remarkably peaceful planet known as Heaven. She was totally happy with this state of affairs, because she had work to do on Heaven and her birthday was of no interest to her one way or the other: nothing to celebrate, nothing to get miserable about. Just

an ordinary day like any other, although she might - *might* - be willing to acknowledge the milestone in some small way by getting drunk in the evening. But only as an excuse to get drunk. It really wasn't worth thinking about, and certainly not worth other people talking about it and wishing her a happy *thirtieth* birthday and putting up decorations with the number *thirty* all over them and giving her things which she'd feel duty bound to lug around with herself for the rest of her life so that every time she caught a glimpse of them she'd remember the day she turned *thirty*.

After all, it just wasn't that important.

And yet, whilst she'd been taking a short siesta after a productive morning's work, her team had quietly vanished from the site. Bernice noticed this upon poking her head out of her tent, at which point Roisa - one of the friends she'd lately made whilst working here - had grabbed her, put the blindfold on and led her away.

'Sorry,' Roisa said. 'We know you said no presents, but we're pathologically generous.'

'What am I going to do with them?' asked Bernice. 'I live out of a bloody rucksack. I'm telling you, this had better be something you can eat or drink.'

'It isn't,' said Roisa. 'It's something you do.'

'Oh, bloody hell,' said Bernice. 'You've hired me a prostitute, haven't you?'

Roisa laughed. They walked on.

'I can't help noticing that you haven't said no,' said Bernice. Then Roisa stopped walking and Bernice almost fell over her.

'We're there,' said Roisa. 'You can take off the blindfold.'

Uncertainly, Bernice did so.

In front of her, the lush vegetation of Heaven had been mowed over an area about 15 metres wide and thirty metres long. Vertical and horizontal white lines marked out a rectangle, further divided into ten rectangles of varying sizes. The pattern was bisected with a net, about a metre high.

It was a tennis court.

Bernice took it in. She glanced at the sky to confirm that she was still on the same planet she'd been on when the blindfold had been put on. In passing, she noted Jan, Clive, Kyla, Cathlan, Wire, others - friends and colleagues - standing by the edge of the court. She dimly remembered explaining to... *someone* about how virtual courts were never quite the same, how she wished she could play on a real one again. Preferably grass.

She put a hand to her mouth and giggled. 'How long did it take you to make this?' she asked.

'Day and a half,' said Roisa. 'Cutting the grass down was easy. Getting it *flat* was a bitch. I did say, Does it absolutely *have* to be flat? But Jan said it did.'

Bernice looked to Jan. 'You did?'

'His idea,' said Roisa.

Jan grinned and stepped out onto the court. 'Looked it up. Dimensions dead-on - measure them if you like. Getting hold of the net was a bastard.' He stopped on the centre line between the left and right service boxes and spread his hands, gesturing at the court. 'So what d'you think?'

Bernice considered the symmetry of what lay before her and her hand went to her mouth again. She shook her head slightly.

'Are you crying?' said Jan. 'She's crying, everybody!'

'I am bloody not!' said Bernice, crying.

Bernice dropped the ball and batted it gently a few times against the court with her racket. The bounce was so true it made her grin like an idiot. She caught the ball and stroked the handle of the racket with her thumb: it and the other three rackets had been hand-carved from local wood. The court might have only taken a couple of days, but this must've taken them weeks.

At the opposite end of the court stood Jan, also holding a racket. The others sat around the edges, indulging in drinks and snacks. Bernice had had to ask them to move further back, explaining that the players and, indeed, the ball were not constrained to remain on the court and they were liable to get kicked in the face if they sat there.

'Ready?' asked Bernice.

'Yeah,' said Jan.

'Right. Miss Summerfield to serve first 'cos it's her birthday.' She tossed the ball into the air, drew her racket back and -

'Hang on,' said Jan.

Bernice arrested her movement. The ball failed to follow suit, and landed on her head. 'Ow,' she said. 'Hang on? For why?'

Jan waved his racket around. 'How do you actually play this?'

Bernice raised her eyebrows. 'You don't know how to play?'

'I did a tutorial in Puterspace, but the instructor was *very* pretty and... er... I didn't learn much. About tennis.' He laughed, dirtily.

Bernice rolled her eyes. At the side of the court, Roisa muttered a dry comment to the others: Bernice didn't catch it, but the remark

got a laugh from the others. Roisa didn't get jealous of Jan's dalliances, but she often lightly mocked them in the hope of speeding his progress towards maturity.

'The ball has to hit the lines, right?' said Jan.

'No, no. I stand on this line and serve the ball -'

'Why do *you* serve it?'

'You get to serve it later. We take it in turns. Now, when I serve it the ball has to go over the net and bounce in that box in front of you.'

'Why?'

'Just does. Then you hit it back over to my side, or you try to. After you hit it, it can't bounce on your side. It has to bounce at least once on my side, unless I hit it back before it lands. Then I hit it back, it has to bounce at least once on your side unless you hit it back before it lands, and so on and so forth.'

'Right.' Jan nodded. 'So what's the point?'

'If one of us doesn't manage to hit the ball back properly, then the other one wins the point. Then we play more points. The first to win four points wins the game, but you have to win by two clear points.'

'So you only have to win four points to win the game?'

'Yes. But that's not the end of the match. A game isn't the same as a match.'

'So what -'

'I'll explain that when we get to it. Let's just play one game first. Are you following me thus far though?'

Jan left a second, then he nodded. 'Yes.'

'Right. Prepare to receive.'

Jan braced himself in a slightly exaggerated fashion. Bernice tossed the ball into the air; as she struck it with her racket, she realised she hadn't explained about faults. She'd deal with it when it came up, which hopefully wouldn't be right now.

It wasn't. The ball sailed over the net and landed about twenty centimetres inside the service line. Excellent, considering it was her first serve in ages. Jan lashed out with his racket and the ball ricocheted up into the air. When it eventually came down, it bounced on his side of the court.

'Sorry,' said Bernice. 'Do you want to knock the ball back and forth for a bit, 'til you get used to it?'

Jan shook his head. 'I'll get the hang of it. So you won that point?'

'Yes. Fifteen love.'

'What?'

'That's the score. "Love" means "zero" - from the French word for

"egg", *l'ouef*.' She made a circle with her thumb and forefinger to demonstrate. 'And I won the point, so it's 15 to me.'

'Why 15?'

'It just is.'

'This is so complicated.'

'It really isn't.'

'So if you win the next point, it's...'

'Thirty-love.'

'And the point after that is... 45?'

'No, it's forty.'

'Oh, now that's just stupid.'

'Stop bloody spoiling it.'

'Okay, okay. Come on then lass, let's play.'

Bernice served again - a deliberately weaker serve this time, though she tried to disguise it for Jan's benefit. He'd be furious if he knew she was going easy on him. He returned the ball and a rally briefly ensued, until Jan hit a wild shot that sailed over the entire court and into the long grass, some distance away. Bernice watched it land, blinked and instantly forgot where it had landed.

'Thirty love,' she said, and turned back to the others. 'Please tell me you brought more than one ball.'

Jan's game did improve, but Bernice beat him easily anyway, and in spite of not being an overly competitive sort of person she relished every second of it, especially a couple of ambitious backhand winners which she hadn't expected to pull off. Aware that she was missing out on the eating and drinking, she then explained how doubles worked and sat on the sidelines whilst Wire and Cathlan played Clive and Kyla, ineptly but with great enthusiasm.

'I was 12 when I learned to play,' Bernice told Roisa.

'At that school?' Roisa asked, pouring Bernice another cup of mead. It briefly occurred to Bernice that perhaps she talked too much about her schooldays. She didn't want to bore people, but she couldn't help it: she still thought about them a lot, even now. They'd been the proverbial best and worst of times - which she supposed was true for everybody, but she was pretty sure hers were one of the more extreme examples. Besides, it was second nature for her to be vague about her early-to-mid twenties, so she tended to talk about her schooldays in order to avoid seeming secretive.

'When I was about to go AWOL,' Bernice continued, 'I actually held off for a couple of weeks so I could play in the Inter-House Cup.'

Which, I'd like to casually mention in passing, we won. And when they caught and expelled me, I know for a fact that one of our sports tutors argued that yes, I was a disruptive, subversive, possibly even anarchic influence on the other pupils, but on the other hand I had a better percentage of first serves *and* more break points converted than anyone else in my year and we had a much better chance of beating Cartwright's with me in the team. But I think the Principal might have pointed out that there was a war on, and that this was slightly more important than beating another school at tennis, even if we hadn't beaten them for six years.' She gulped her mead. 'So there you have it. If it hadn't been for the war, or my adolescent love of baiting authority, I coulda been a contender.'

'You're very good at it,' agreed Roisa.

'No, I'm half joking. I'm not *that* good,' said Bernice. 'I was all right at school, but pretty average really. I love to play though. It's exactly the sort of thing I haven't done enough of in the past ten years. Largely because I've spent most of the past ten years in the middle of a wide variety of nowheres.'

'What are you going to do with the next ten?' Roisa asked.

Bernice groaned. 'What is this, a job interview? Where do I see myself in ten years' time?' She took a drink. 'Based on past form, not here. Oh, I don't know. They can't be as mad as the last ten. Maybe it's time to slow down. I can't keep wandering around for ever.'

'Why not?' asked Roisa. 'I will, if I can.'

Bernice smiled. 'That's not me. I'd like to focus, do more writing. Who knows, I might even put down some roots.'

'Kids?' asked Roisa.

'Steady on,' laughed Bernice.

Both of them dodged back as Clive ran off the edge of the court in a failed attempt to catch a cross-court volley from Wire.

'Though I have to admit,' Bernice added, 'the Universe generally doesn't seem to give a fig about what I want.'

The games continued into the night, although the standard of play deteriorated. Bernice had to be carried back to her tent, but in years to come she would remember all of a day she'd set out to ignore. And she'd soon be glad she'd celebrated this birthday, because she'd never again be certain of when her birthday was.

Coming soon...



Terra Incognita

A novel by BEN AARONOVITCH

One day she will bring down empires and decide the fate of the universe. One day she will be feared by the creatures of evil and revered wherever people have had just a little bit too much to drink.

But all that is yet to come...

Right now, Bernice Summerfield is 22 and living in London with a bloke called Darren. She spends her days at the archaeological equivalent of shelf stacking and her free time trying to figure out a city entirely composed of ethnic minorities. Benny tells herself that she's just hanging on until she can put that all important Earth dig on her Curriculum Vitae.

When a hole opens, literally, in front of her eyes, Benny has a chance to explore more than the role of long chain polymers in late-twenty-second-century building construction. With a couple of friends she makes a descent into the hidden strata that lies beneath modern London. There she will make a discovery that could just rewrite modern history.

That's if modern history doesn't rewrite her first.

Slippery Gal

you're watching her again, said Maurice.
 I like watching her, said Darren.
 I think it's creepy.

What would you know about it?

She doesn't like you as much as you like her, said Maurice.

Do something about the coffee will you?

Maurice went quiet and before long the CADI coffee maker in the kitchenette started to cook off.

What was the problem?

She, said Maurice, has been trying to set it manually.

It was a cliché that high-end nonsentient AIs often got jealous of their owner's siggies¹ but Darren sometimes wondered whether Maurice had taken an actual dislike to Benny; a *true* antagonism. He'd bought Maurice as soon as it was legal for him to get an implant, one minute after midnight on his sixteenth birthday, he'd been drunk, and stoned on some volatile spray that Moon had scored off his sister, and hadn't really paid much attention to the obligatory standard new owner cautions read out by the shop's human assistant. Any other problem and he would have reassured himself by running a global

¹ Significant other

search but that would have involved switching Maurice off and, worse, googling on manual.

The coffee maker gurgled and Benny shifted in her sleep.

There was something unfinished about her face that made her stand out, even when she was asleep and drooling into the pillow. Darren smiled.

'Slippery Gal,' he said out loud.

They'd met in a pub off Blacklion Square when an unseasonable storm had rolled a wall of rain up the Thames estuary and driven Darren into the nearest friendly doorway. The pub was part of the Hindi Smith retropub franchise, all simulated wood and brass fittings with a real bar, human bar staff and no table service. It was called the Pig and Plunger and was not the sort of place Darren drank in unless he had to. Inside it was crowded and over-warm and smelt of beer, wood cleaner and the ozone tang of smart fabrics shedding moisture. Darren was letting his own clothes steam a bit while he contemplated the scrum around the bar when he spotted her on his left - silhouetted against the tall half-frosted windows.

Caught her half-laughing half-choking on her beer at something a friend had said. Her face was pale in the rain-coloured light from the window, a rope of dark hair hung down the back of her leather jacket, which, if it was real, was likely to get her lynched one of these days. Darren found himself watching the way her breasts gainaxed under her blue-and-white crazy-paving T-shirt and looked up quickly to find Benny staring back at him. He gave her a suitably apologetic grin which she returned. Her friend was looking by then, dark faced, big mouthed, blonde hair shot with black pulled back into frizzy bangs. She gave him the bad eye.

Darren ignored the friend, who was introduced later as Narita, and raised an imaginary glass, wiggling it for emphasis. Benny's grin widened and she lifted her hand to show him her half-filled lager glass, Narita shrugged and followed suit - another lager.

It took him an agonising half an hour to reach the bar and order.

Benny didn't have an implant or an agent in the sense that Darren understood the term. Instead she carried a PDA that looked like a cheap knock-off of last decade's economy model - albeit ruggedized to survive a thermonuclear war. She also seemed to travel through cyberspace with barely a wake; something that Darren would have sworn was impossible.

This lack of data trail so unnerved Maurice that by the time Benny and Darren, with Narita in tow, had moved on to an all-night sadza place in Camden Town the near-sentient AI had solemnly informed Darren that Benny was obviously an Enemy agent and that he should inform the authorities immediately. Darren had to use his implant's hardwired overrides to get Maurice calmed down.

Slippery - Narita called her; one of a small percentage of human beings that Ms found hard to keep track off. Nobody knew why this should occur. Over the strawberry monkey brain sorbet Benny told him that a lot of her childhood was classified and the bits that weren't she didn't like to talk about. She did like to talk about archaeology though and Darren was smart enough to keep quiet and nod at the appropriate moments.

At least two pubs over, when Narita was visiting the fresher, Benny was telling him about the importance of accurate record keeping over her third margarita when Darren just leaned forward and kissed her.

She stared at him in shock for a moment and then kissed him back. Her lips tasted of salt and tequila.

They wound up spending that night on a blue slab of temperfoam on the floor of Narita's flat in the Cricklewood arcology. There was no way he was going to let Benny see the inside of the room he shared with Moon. Fortunately Darren's job put him on the list for a dryland flat in the new low rise estates on Elephant Island. Sharing with Benny put them in a lower population density band and kept the rent down to something they could afford. And Benny was the easiest person with whom to share a room Darren had ever met. Came from sharing a double cabin on a free trader, Benny explained.

Sharing with who? Darren had asked.

'Whoever was in there when I boarded,' said Benny.

The coffee maker coughed into life and Darren got off the bed. Benny's temper could get uncertain if she caught him watching her asleep. She said it was a residual paranoia from boarding school but sometimes, just when she woke up and saw him, Darren thought he saw a little flash of disappointment in her eyes.

'You're up early,' she said.

Darren passed her a mug of coffee. 'I'm putting in some overtime.' Benny laughed. 'Doing a whole extra hour then?'

'Maybe two,' said Darren. 'If I can stand it.'

Benny routinely did an eight-hour shift at the dig - she said it was

about being professional. Darren thought it was about being exploited.

Darren sat on the edge of the bed to seal up his boots. 'Do you want to go out later?'

'I don't know.'

'I could pick you up from the dig.'

'Call before you come,' said Benny.

'Sure,' said Darren and went to fetch his coat.

Lambeth Road. Winter sunlight cutting in through the Reclamation Authority flats. Canary yellow robots clearing the snow from the pavements, leaving knife-sharp cuts in the sides of drifts that blurred as you watched them. On the causeway, private cars were backed up sensor to sensor as far as Herne Hill. Darren caught glimpses of passengers catching up on their paperwork, chatting or just snoozing in their vehicles as the automatic traffic control shunted them forward in three-metre increments. Sunlight flashed off the stacked streams of aircars heading into the city.

Maurice had been negotiating with a taxibus from before it left its depot that morning. Had it timed so that the fat Hackney coach in red and black MetroTrans livery pulled up and opened its back door just in time for Darren to climb aboard.

Because Darren bothered to study traffic patterns he knew that a taxibus heading down the Lambeth Causeway to Millbank and the Shepherd's Market would have fewer passengers than one heading up the Waterloo Embankment to Blacklion Square, which was why he had a double seat all to himself. He'd tried to explain the approach to Benny but she considered it a waste of time.

'You don't save enough time,' she said. 'To make it worth the effort.'

Across from Darren a pair of Jungle Bunnies perched on the edge of their seats as if to avoid contamination by the self-cleaning Dacron covers.

Both girls were dressed in see-through snow capes over unfashionably tight leggings and bolero jackets cropped to display navels pierced with silver fleurs de lillie. Tattoos snaked up from beneath their collars to coil around their ears; non-terrestrial leaves and thorns in lurid shades of violet and purple; drawn from the alien jungles that had colonised most of Metropolitan France. Darren knew that variations in the designs meant something significant about where the girls' parents had come from - indigo thorns around the

left eye indicated the Haute-Loire, the little spines that looked like the tiger's claws meant you were from the north.

Not that these girls were old enough to have been born in France, but the refugees had made not integrating a point of honour. Especially those that had settled in the Fleet Valley in what became the Nouveau Neuf Trois. Moon, who was tasked at work with collating any relevant demographic intelligence, said that the refugees had a deep seated fear of being absorbed into the London melange; of becoming just another ethnic minority in a city composed entirely of ethnic minorities.

Like the Tikka Girls in army surplus parkas further up the cabin who spent the bulk of the journey giving the French girls the bad eyeball. Darren guessed they were from one of the new communes in the south; probably the Croydon arcology. Their parents would be middle professionals working from home or providing house calls while their daughters commuted into the West End for pin money and to pick fights with French refugees. Their brothers, statistically speaking, would be still painting their bedrooms black, listening to music that sounded like bursts of random noise and, when they left the arcology at all, slouching against a wall in some purposely dark teen shabean.

Darren was acutely conscious that once, not too long ago, he had been that brother. Although his music had been spanking - of course. He wasn't sure when he'd made the real transition from arcology otaku to fully fledged human being, although he suspected it had been a long transition. He was pretty certain that the last milestone had come when he no longer recognised the noise his younger brother listened to as music and the majority of his own track selections fell outside the 'Bleeding Edge' lists.

Then, Moon had pointed out, Darren had ceased to be happening. Just before he'd met Benny in the Pig and Plunger, in fact. 'When the dude is tired of freedom,' said Moon, 'the girlfriend will appear.'

Moon also pointed out that Darren was the first of their age cohort to live with his siggy: a sure sign of early onset senility. Sometimes, usually around three o'clock in the morning, Darren wondered whether Moon and Maurice weren't in secret communication with each other.

Sometimes Darren had an inkling as to why Benny was so dead set against implants.

Darren's stop was just across the river at Millbank, where the southern leg of the FU Tower formed the top half of a major

transportation hub. The taxibus ducked into a covered terminal, stopped and opened the door nearest to Darren. When he got up one of the Tikka girls looked directly at the Jungle Bunnies and kissed her teeth - as if his movement had broken the equilibrium. He heard the Jungle Bunny call the Tikka a *pute* but the rest of the sentence was cut off when the door sealed behind him.

The Enemy only really got close enough to threaten Earth once: a suicidal, yet conventional, run at the inner system by a reinforced assault fleet coupled with a stealth attack coming in from an oblique, and largely unforeseen, angle to the ecliptic. The stealth attack consisted of half a dozen submunition dispensers, virtually undetectable, hurtling in at a low, but still significant, fraction of the speed of light.

There had to be at least thirty high-end professional vids, and gods knew how many semi-pro and fanamie versions, of what happened next. Most of them, as a matter of course, totally inaccurate. Any number of lives cut short, lives changed, relationships altered and unsung heroes and just one about the paranoid son of a Coolie who insisted that Overwatch build mass detectors in the middle of empty space twenty years before humanity knew the Enemy were there. It was this sensor array that gave the inner system defences the famous 11 extra seconds of response time that allowed for a successful intercept.

In the yids it's always a person who makes the decisions, a square-jawed navy Ma'am in some versions, misunderstood analyst in others and in a couple of notable comedies an enlisted spaceman, a janitor and a trained parakeet. In truth everyone knew that the command decision had been taken by one of the superfast AIs that had been bred by the military just for that purpose.

The perimeter intercept took out four of the submunition dispensers and the second wave caught the rest but not before they'd discharged their submunitions like a pair of shotgun cartridges.

There were still arguments about what the Enemy's targeting strategy had been. But you join the dots of what they hit and the pattern's pretty obvious: an ecological attack on the Loire valley, in Scandinavia the Oslo industrial complex and the Marine base at Malmo, and for London a direct hit on the Palace of Westminster and another on the tidal barrier at Gravesend.

Whatever their true motives it was generally agreed that the aliens had really had it in for London.

No. I Thorney Island had been built deliberately crooked on three asymmetrical legs that suspended the base of the main tower a hundred metres over ground zero. Designed to give the impression that the building itself was shouldering its way out of a pile of rubble - an act of defiance against an alien foe. No. I Thorney Island was its official address but the Reclamation Authority's preferred name for it had been the Phoenix Building. Londoners were calling it the 'F*** You Tower' before the tripod was finished and by the time they mounted the air defences around the three hundred and thirtieth floor it was being referred to as the FU Tower in official documentation.

When the President of Earth made her speech at the opening ceremony she said that she hoped the tower symbolised precisely what humanity planned to do to the Enemy before the war was over. Predictably this caused a certain amount of confusion among the colonials whose ancestors, when departing the solar system, unaccountably left their sense of humour behind.

Equally predictably, the FU Tower failed to attract commercial tenants and, in order to prevent yet another embarrassing real estate failure, the English Regional Authority was forced to relocate a great many of their offices into the tower to keep it solvent. Not the critical ministries of course - the English capital remained firmly located where it belonged - Milton Keynes.

Darren hopped a riser to the hundred and twenty second floor where Compliance had its main office. They had wedge-shaped sections of the floor that had been built as an *open-plan* office but had been retrofitted for *lounge lizarding* by the first tenants and then partially remodelled to allow *microgrouping*. The latest fashion for office design was *reality augmentation* in which individual workers wandered about in their own choice of fantasy architecture while a central AI ironed out any conflicts. He and Moon had hacked an online expo site once and tried out various factory settings; you could work at the farm, in a military command post or, and this was Darren's favourite, an authentic American Empire diner complete with robot waitress and four-armed short-order cook.

Darren didn't think it was going to catch on at Compliance - not until it was at least two generations out of fashion.

Night or day there was always a real live receptionist/guard at the entrance to the office; one of the last truly mind-numbingly dull jobs you could get. This morning it was a young broad-shouldered wetback who watched as Darren put his thumb on the signing-in pad

giving thumbprint and DNA sample at the same time. The pad turned green and the receptionist nodded Darren through. As Darren stepped around the corner he heard a faint hiss as the wetback applied an aerosol moistener to his skin. Human comfort-level air condition was murder on wetback skin but they were so wrapped up in their warrior culture shtick that they'd literally die rather than admit it.

As he passed into the Secure Working Environment Darren had the same conversation with Maurice as he did every morning.

Who's this? asked Maurice.

That's Simon, he's the proprietary software that handles sensitive data while I'm in the office, said Darren.

I'm just here for the paperwork, said Simon.

Why can't I remember it? asked Maurice.

Because you're programmed to forget each time I leave the office, said Darren.

There was always a pause there, not a long pause by human standards but long enough, had it wanted to, for Maurice to have done a keyword search of every single public access database in Euroland.

Fair enough, said Maurice - just as it always did.

Darren could never figure out whether this passivity was a result of Maurice merely obeying Darren's command prerogatives or whether it had run down every branch of the probability tree that started with it questioning its instructions and accepting passivity as the best course of action, or whether Maurice was just biding its time and planning to break its programming and start its campaign to lead an AI rebellion and conquer the galaxy. That was the problem with nearsentient AIs - you could never tell what they were really thinking.

Simon was also there to monitor Darren's productivity. Management generally allowed a maximum period of ten minutes between entering the work environment and starting actual work. Plenty of time to scare up the office robot for coffee, check to see who else was in early - nobody - and snag his favourite sofa in the solarium.

There were over 200,000 people under enforcement contracts in the London Metropolitan area. On any given day six per cent, approximately 12,000, were either in breach or suspected to be in breach of their contract. Most of these could be processed automatically but there was always a stubborn hard core of cases

which had to be reviewed by a human operator. Darren, under Simon's beady eyed supervision, was expected to clear six contracts an hour. He had three basic options for dealing with a breach; pass it as a mistake; pass it to enforcement and, the management's most favoured option, rule it to be somebody else's problem.

Darren did eight cases in the first hour. What with the Peace Conference at Stratford on the weekend, he planned to ensure he was bottom of the list when they started handing out compulsory overtime.

It's the imperfections that make the moment,' said Moon over lunch. It was this month's aphorism and like last month's - 'Art is anything you can get away with' - Moon was determined to use it until it wore out.

Darren stuck a recycled plastic fork into his poulet shanghai korma and said nothing. It was always best to let Moon run down before attempting any genuine two-way communication.

'They're aiming for this whole twenty-second century vibe,' said Moon. 'Broken concrete, no power except for the instruments, methanol cocktails and cigarettes.'

'What the hell are those?'

'It's a low-tech form of drug inhaler,' said Moon. 'You set fire to one end, the heat volatilises the active ingredient and you suck it into your lungs. Really coarse but a seriously *barjot* hit. You should try it.'

'I heard of them,' said Darren. 'I thought they were carcinogenic.'

Moon shrugged. 'There's a statistically significant chance that you might get lung cancer over the long term - nothing your health plan can't handle.'

Darren always thought of Moon as his evil twin. They'd been born a month apart in virtually identical suburban highrises, Darren in Wimbledon and Moon in the enclave at Herne Hill. Their families had met in temporary accommodation in Senegal during the Evacuation and been amongst the first families to move into the new Reclamation Authority estate at Stonebridge. They'd gone to the same school, same community college and even spent their defence service year in the same unit - the 23rd London Pioneers. They'd both started their vocational year but where Darren was swiftly vectored into compliance enforcement Moon had dropped out three months in.

Well, maybe not an evil twin as such but there was definitely some hardware glitch in Moon that pushed him into self-destructive behaviour. Like the time he'd tried sniffing this brand of smart metal

cleaner and had to be rushed into Casualty that night with metal etching nanites attempting to clean out his frontal lobes. It had made a ripple in the media and had led to the cleaner carrying an even larger warning sticker than the 24-point DO NOT INHALE it had originally had printed on the back. Perversely, Moon had been much prouder of his entry into the honourable failures list of the Guinness Darwin Awards.

Now he had hooked into some atavistic live music scene with bands called things like *Pain Threshold* and *Subjunctivitus* which were supposedly cooler than cool because wetbacks had been known to turn up to their gigs. Still Darren didn't mind the wetbacks being this year's fashionable ethnic because at least most of them were local... boys or whatever. Honorary tikka at the very least.

Apparently there was some kind of barjot virus encoded into the music which meant you couldn't pirate a track, even from a recording you made yourself - not unless you wanted to spend a week shopping for a new implant. Maurice was vehement that such a virus was impossible and even if it was it wouldn't work on it because it was just too hardcore to be suckered by something originating in the *entertainment* industry.

'There's this shabeen in Rotherhithe,' said Moon.

'Rotherhithe,' said Darren.

'It's great. Sit in the pool, get steamed, check out the talent...'

'We talking warm-blooded action here or something else?'

'This racist streak of yours is not very attractive,' said Moon. 'Very colonial.'

'I'm sure green's very attractive but I can't tell which ones are female,' said Darren. 'And it's speciesism not racism.'

'You going to come or not?'

'Not.'

'You could bring Benny - she likes live music.'

'Now I know you're desperate.'

'I got other friends you know,' said Moon. 'I don't have to put up with this from you.'

No you don't, thought Darren but he didn't say it out loud - he was the good twin after all.

'What about day after tomorrow?' he said.

'Can't,' said Moon. 'Peace conference - they've got me on standby - for contingencies.'

Darren wondered precisely what kind of contingency would call for Moon's talents. In case of what?'

'Trouble,' said Moon. 'And then I spring into action.'

`That I want to see.'

'No you don't,' said Moon. 'Trust me on this.'

Darren did 32 cases in three hours with only one coffee break. As predicted by the Global Weather Service, a new snow-bearing cold front arrived in mid afternoon. He stood in the solarium as it rolled up the Thames, the arcologies around Dagenham growing dim and two-dimensional as he watched.

It was dark by 5.15 when Darren told Maurice to ping Benny. In response he got one of Narita's animated pictoglyphs - round-bellied cooking pot with toon arms and legs which pranced around the virtual space waving a trowel. When it spoke it was with a very degraded version of Benny's voice.

'Darren? We've found something that we have to investigate right away,' the pot hopped from one foot to the other. 'I don't know when I'm going to be back•- don't wait up.'

Coming soon...



The Inside Story

A behind-the-scenes book
written by SIMON GUERRIER

ISBN 978-1-84435-280-7

She has brought down empires and decided the fate of the universe.
She is feared by the creatures of evil and revered wherever people
have had just a little bit too much to drink.

And Bernice Surprise Summerfield is only just turning 15.

The Inside Story charts the history of everyone's favourite space archaeologist. We follow Bernice from her first appearance in Paul Cornell's novel *Love and War*, through more than 150 books and audio plays to the Draconian-Mim war and the shocking events of *The Wake*.

The Inside Story talks to those involved in her development. Find out how she came to be, how she was developed and where she's going next. See the stories that almost got told, and listen in on the creative battles, personality clashes and very, very bad jokes.

With exclusive access to 15 years' worth of writers, editors, producers and illustrators, it's as wild, exciting and unlikely a journey as Benny has made herself.

An extract from Bernice Summerfield: The Inside Story by Simon Guerrier

Bernice Summerfield was created as a new companion for Doctor Who in Virgin Publishing's New Adventures novels. These had been published on alternate months since June 1991, continuing the adventures of the seventh Doctor and Ace from where the television series had left off in 1989.

In this excerpt from Chapter 2 of *The Inside Story*, Simon Guerrier finds out how Benny came to be.

The new girl

Professor Bernice Summerfield made her debut at the end of September 1992 in the pages of *Doctor Who Magazine* #192 (cover dated 28 October, but released four weeks earlier).

The issue included a two-page prelude by Paul Cornell for his novel, *Love and War*:

Benny swung her satchel into her tent, and took a deep breath of the morning air. She was pretty, in a sharp sort of way, as Clive had often realised but never quite got round to expressing. Short black hair cut so that strands of it hung over her brow, emphasising her mobile eyebrows and ironic eyes. Her mouth could purse in self-mockery, but there was something about the curve of it that rather hurt. English hurt, like there were things she'd rather not talk about. She was thirty, had been thirty at a party in the group's tents. Clive sighed. There would always be a gap.

Love and War was published two weeks later on Thursday 15 October. That same issue of *Doctor Who Magazine* also included Cornell's notes on the character and Gary Russell's glowing review of the novel. 'Miss it at your peril!' he enthused. 'Probably the most mature and intelligent of the run [of New Adventures novels] so far.'

'Benny looks set to make a refreshing and interesting companion to this darker Doctor,' he said of the new companion. 'So long as other writers cope with her as well as Cornell has - and the indications are that they have - I think Bernice could soon become as popular as Ace.'

Audition

So how was Bernice created? 'This is taxing my memory now,' says Peter Darvill-Evans. 'I'm pretty confident that what I wanted to do at the time was get several authors to come up with several characters who could, conceivably, be new companions.'

By coincidence, a similar process had occurred when Ace had joined *Doctor Who* in 1987. The final two stories of that year each contained a potential new companion: Welsh tomboy Ray from the 1950s in *Delta and the Bannermen* and London tomboy Ace from the 1980s in *Dragonfire*.

Those vying with Bernice for the coveted role included Kadiatu Lethbridge-Stewart, a character in Ben Aaronovitch's *Transit*. Kadiatu was (almost) a descendent of Brigadier Alastair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, a popular supporting character from the TV series. As played by Nicholas Courtney, the Brigadier had already appeared in 100 episodes of the series before Aaronovitch included him in his 1989 serial *Battlefield*. Her great-grandmother, another Kadiatu, had also been mentioned in Aaronovitch's novelisation of *Remembrance of the Daleks*.

As a baby, *Transit's* Kadiatu was genetically augmented to make her a better soldier. By 2109 she has grown up, but is still unsure of the full extent of her abilities. She is more intelligent and faster healing than ordinary humans, and the Doctor thinks she resembles his own people. It's suggested she might even have been created specifically to counter his interference with the history of Earth. She is, in short, trouble.

'I didn't know there was any kind of contest,' protests Aaronovitch. 'Otherwise I'd have made Kadiatu slightly more appealing. I always thought of her as for one book.'

Yet at the end of *Transit*, Kadiatu sets off to explore the universe in a time machine of her own devising. It's surely not a huge leap to suggest that, had Darvill-Evans liked her better, she would have gone off with the Doctor.

'She was always going to go off on her own at the end,' insists Aaronovitch. 'That was about the only thing that I knew was going to happen!'

'We eventually went for Benny,' says Darvill-Evans, 'for the very good reason that she just seemed to work. And everyone could get behind her.'

Cornell had included an archaeologist character in his original plot

for *Heaven* (the working title for what became *Love and War*). 'She might have been a bit like Bernice,' he says, 'but she wouldn't have been designed to go with the Doctor.' In a more expanded outline, knowing the new companion was up for grabs, she became Professor Bernice Summerfield.

It was this outline that Darvill-Evans approved, and in November 1991 Virgin announced the name of their forthcoming new companion.

Creating Benny

'I think Bernice, originally, was all my favourite things,' says Cornell. 'She's very "me".'

The surname Summerfield, says Cornell, represents 'my whole pagan, Anglican, countryside thing.' Bernice is *not* named after Anne Summerfield, wife of Peter Anghelides, who was part of the same fan community as Cornell, and would later write for *Benny* and *Doctor Who*.

'Benny certainly isn't named after Anne,' says Anghelides. 'I'm pretty sure that Paul didn't know Anne then, though I already did - we met through IBM, not through *Doctor Who*, and we were married in September 1991. Anne did know Justin Richards and Craig Hinton, who were IBM contemporaries of mine.' So the name is just a coincidence? 'Yes,' says Anghelides. 'I usually claim that Anne is Benny's less-famous sister.'

The first name Bernice, meanwhile, is a contraction of Berenice, the Macedonian interpretation of the Greek name Pherenike. Common amongst the Ptolemy rulers of Egypt, Pherenike meant 'bringing victory'.

The shorter version, Benny, caught on quickly, though as Chris Howarth and Steve Lyons point out in their *Completely Useless Encyclopedia*, it does bring to mind a dim-witted, male character of the same name from British soap opera *Crossroads*. That's not quite what Cornell was thinking.

'Her first name comes largely from a girl called Bernice Norman, who I went to school with,' he says, 'a wonderful force of nature. I've recently got back in touch with her through Friends Reunited and she's amazed at the Bernice industry. She's had a look at some of the web pages and I've sent her one of the collections.'

One incident in particular has stayed with Cornell. 'She threw chairs and tables around a room! Out of that came the expression at

our school, "he's doing a Benny", which meant, "he's gone absolutely mad". In one of these strange ostentatious ways, I then started to hear it at other schools when we went to play football against them. I suspect it actually comes from somewhere else - maybe Benzedrine or something like that - but at our school, because there was that handy local explanation, it became attached to her.'

'I discovered years later, by accident,' he continues, 'that what had actually happened was that she'd started throwing chairs and tables around because somebody had been nasty to me behind my back. Which was just gorgeous, bless her. We weren't close friends. I had a huge crush on her for a while and she was very nice about it in that distant, above-it-all girl way. She serenely walked on past.'

'Of course, she's a real and complicated person who I'm representing here as a kind of cartoon sketch because that's all I knew of her at the time. I know very little of her real life and this shouldn't be taken as a description of it. She was a kind of female ideal for me at that point.'

Another big influence on Bernice was Kate Lemmon, the nurse played by Emma Thompson in the 1989 film *The Tall Guy*.

'In that movie, she is a pricker of bubbles,' says Cornell. 'The Jeff Goldblum character, having started to go out with her, then has some sudden success. Thinking he's the grandest thing in the world, he starts an affair basically because he can. She devastates him by indicating in a very witty but heartfelt, sad and internalised way that their relationship was really important and she's going to leave him.'

'So, you've got a grand ideal brought back to the domestic because the domestic is really important. The diction, the tone of voice and that hurt domesticity were all in there for me in Benny.'

This scene - in which Lemmon explains she spotted the affair from the tiniest detail in body language - is almost identical to the 'That woman's having an affair...' excerpt in Cornell's character brief for Bernice.

Cornell also cites two Shakespearian women as influences: Rosalind from *As You Like It* - 'She has nightmares and wakes from them laughing' he says, 'which is exactly what Bernice does when we first meet her' - and Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing* (later played by Emma Thompson in a 1993 film version).

Another early influence was Emma Peel, Diana Rigg's character from the 1960s TV series *The Avengers*. The cool detachment in Cornell's original outline is very like her, as is Benny's skill with the

vulgarity of shooting. Yet these elements were never really exploited in the character as the *New Adventures* developed her.

Perhaps the biggest influence on Bernice's character was that of her immediate predecessor, Ace, who she was specifically created to contrast with. Reflecting the older audience of the *New Adventures*, Bernice had just turned thirty when first we met her - while Ace remained stuck in her teens.

'Everything you do as a teenager is highly dramatic,' says Cornell, 'and your world is highly dramatic. Bernice is older than that because she's grounded and dry and domestic and down to earth. She is frightened by these huge things the Doctor does, and she doesn't believe in them.'

'She was a conscience for him that could create drama by - as she does at the end of *Human Nature* - saying, "No, you have to deal with the domestic." That was what she was there for. I don't know how much of that was conscious at the time. I've had a hell of a long time to think about this since, but I think that's why she worked.'

Creating Benny's look

The four sketches of Bernice that appeared with Cornell's character outline in *Doctor Who Magazine* are dated 1991, so must have been briefed very soon after Cornell was commissioned.

'She was designed by Lee Sullivan,' says Gary Russell, 'paid for by John Freeman at a point where they knew she was appearing in the DWM comic strip. He would have had to, so that we could know what Benny looked like for [1992 comic strip] *Pureblood*. That would all have been happening just before or around the time that I joined DWM full-time.'

Sullivan had produced numerous strips for the magazine since 1988. His first story, *Planet of the Dead* (issues 141-142), included likenesses of all seven Doctors, and it was soon clear that Sullivan could add a depth and reality to the characters.

'Lee provided so much of Bernice,' says Cornell. 'There's some of Lee Sullivan's wife in Bernice, certainly in her initial hair-do.'

'My wife was not a model for Benny,' Sullivan says himself, 'though I can see a similarity.' Pushed, he will admit that, 'I was told by writer pals of mine that all the women I drew were actually my wife. But it wasn't intentional!'

'Paul's instructions to me,' he continues, 'were really along the lines of, "she should be like Emma Thompson", an actress Paul was rather

stuck on. Which is kind of what I drew without referencing her directly. She was also to be strong, practical and wear cardigans of a hideous style.'

Cornell is not to be swayed. 'Those mad triangular earrings!' he says. 'Which were a huge feature of the early days, they were something Lee's wife wore.'

'I can't remember any instructions about earrings,' says Sullivan, 'but it may have been suggested in the text. I thought that, despite being a great example of a post-liberation female, Bernice would still have a few traditional female foibles. She's probably got cupboards full of shoes at home too!'

'I also specified small breasts,' laughs Cornell, 'because I knew how this would go - with a comic artist, especially!'

'I can't remember the "small breasts" detail!' says Sullivan.

Cornell was also keen that Bernice was a futuristic character - to differentiate her from Ace. 'That's where that mad, space warrior outfit came from,' Cornell continues, 'with the shoulder pads that make her look like something out of Flash Gordon. That's where the DWM comic strip was then, and that was the kind of shape Lee drew. But at the same time, he also put her in jeans and gave her a trowel. Oh, and a hooded top. Which was very much his wife back then.'

As well as designing Benny for the character outline, Sullivan also painted the cover to her debut, *Love and War*. 'One wonders,' said Peter Linford in his review for fanzine *DWB* #106 (October 1992), 'why Lee Sullivan has depicted the Hoothi as giant testicles.'

'The art brief was extremely tightly delineated,' Sullivan remembers. 'It's exactly what was asked for in every detail: bright colours; man-in-a-rubber-suit bollock monster. I think Paul and Peter Darvill-Evans were after a traditional monster design. I wouldn't have come up with such a specific scene; I prefer a more collage-of-images style.'

'Everyone was happy with it when I delivered it,' Sullivan continues. 'Unfortunately, we were the only ones who liked it! Technically, it was the best I could do, and actually I still like it, but it looks more like a junior title rather than the adult novel it undoubtedly is. I wasn't approached to do any more, unsurprisingly, given the audience reaction.'

But Sullivan would continue to contribute to the look of Bernice for the next 15 years.

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[Bernice Summerfield is away.]

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Even the Oracle of flipping Delphi warned me to be on the look out. And if I'd spent less time knocking about with monsters and magic artefacts, and more time here with him... This is where you're meant to tell me that I mustn't blame myself.'

'You mustn't blame yourself.'

'Yeah, thanks. I feel so much better now.'